

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

15¢
AUG.



TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES!

FEATURE NOVEL

- **OLD DEVIL HASSETT
RIDES THE MAIL**

by TOM ROAN

TWO NOVELETES

- **KILL THAT
JERKLINE CREW!**

by DEL RAYBURN

- **BACK-TRAIL
HARVEST**

by PETER DAWSON

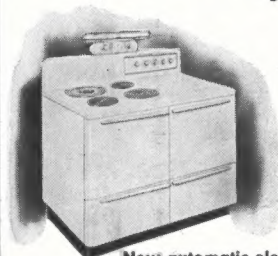
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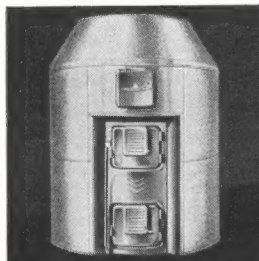
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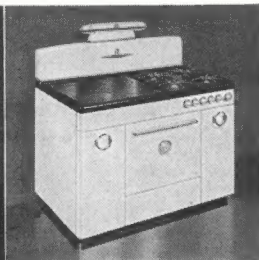
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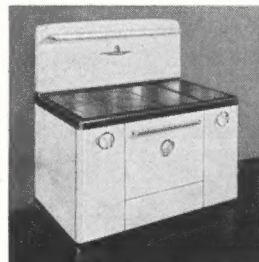
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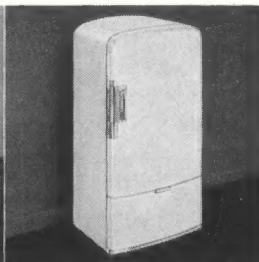
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IT WORKED!
AND HE SAID
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A LONG TIME



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MON-- WHY,
WHERE'S THAT
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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AUGUST 9th

VOLUME XXXI

AUGUST, 1946

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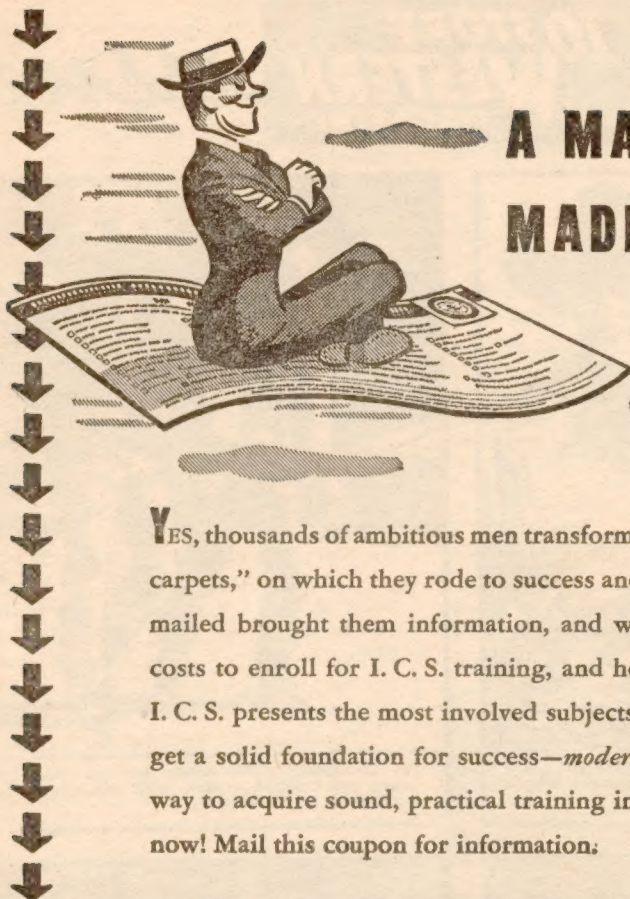
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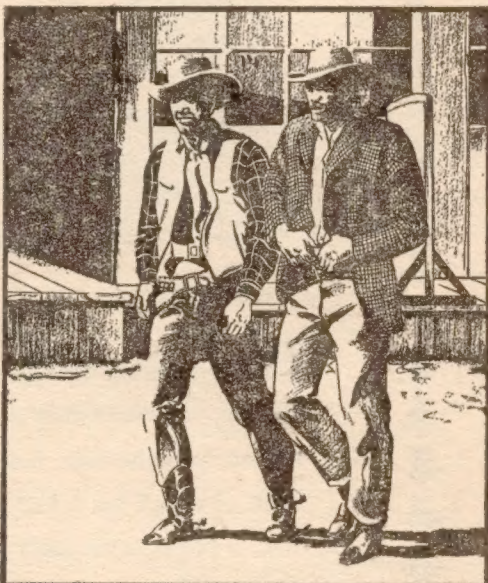
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**10 STORY
WESTERN
MAGAZINE**

issue



Big Hank, tough border rancher, bought a big herd of Mexican cattle. And with it he bought a heap of fighting trouble.



For treacherous Slim Coutts and gun-fast Jack Doerr had brought a curse with that Ghost Herd from south of the Border.



A mysterious and beautiful singer knew of the blackest day of Big Hank's past—and she sang Slim Coutts into a killing frenzy.



The complete, dramatic story of Big Hank will be told by Walt Coburn in "Boss of the Ghost Herd" . . . September issue—published August 9th.



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A THOUSAND MILES TO GLORY

By WALLACE EWING

WESTERN men astride Western horseflesh are the greatest thoroughbreds in the world," wrote the editor of a weekly in Chadron, Nebraska in 1893. Idly filling up space in his editorial page, he went on to propose a 1000 mile horse race from Chadron to Chicago to prove his point.

He didn't know what he had started. Newspapers all over the country reprinted his challenge to the Eastern turf champions. From Chicago, Buffalo Bill Cody wired the surprised editor an offer of \$500 to the winner if the race would end at his Wild West Show.

Chadron citizens worked themselves into a lather of excitement, donated another \$1000. Colt put up an ivory-handled .44, and Montgomery Ward offered a silver-mounted saddle as consolation prizes. The 1000 mile race was on.

Favored entries were Doc Middleton of Chadron, a forty-year-old, lanky cowpoke; Joe Gillespie, who unhappily weighed in at 185 pounds and little John Berry, a former stagecoach driver. Nine others, including a boy of seventeen named Dave Douglas and James "Rattlesnake Pete" Stephens of Kansas, were ready to ride.

The route lay through eleven towns. Each man had two horses. On June 13, 1893, Chadron gave them a howling send-off, with artillery and Indian yells that sent the horses scuttling across the prairie at a distinguished speed. Out of sight, they slowed down, staying well-bunched for about three days.

Young Davy was the first to drop out—hit by a violent spell of saddle sickness. As the rest drew into Sioux City, Doc Middleton was in the lead. Favored in the betting, he rode over flower-strewn streets and was pelted with bouquets flung by pretty girls. Souvenir hunters pulled hairs from his horses' tails. John Berry, then a day behind with his steady, persistent jog-trotting, was totally ignored.

The following day, Doc Middleton's lead horse pulled a tendon. Undismayed, he shifted his saddle to the mount he was saving for the final burst and declared his intention of staying in. But his second

horse stepped into a hole and broke two legs.

Near Fort Dodge, Gillespie and Rattlesnake Pete were in the vanguard, but John Berry, far in the rear, drew steadily closer. Deliberately starving himself, Berry lost fifteen pounds between Iowa Falls and Waterloo.

Rattlesnake Pete strengthened his remaining mount by pouring a quart of whiskey down its throat. It seemed to do a lot for the horse, so he tried it himself. Then he and the skittish animal split another quart—and happily abandoned the race. Now it was the merry-hearted, fat Gillespie and slow, methodical John Berry.

Seventy miles from the finish line, the riders were scheduled to be escorted by Humane Society officials, who were to ride along in buggies and make sure that no cruelty was used to goad the animals to a final spurt. Gillespie thundered into DeKalb, Ill. and charted all the buggies in every livery stable, thus thwarting the outraged Human officials in their mission.

But Berry hurriedly accepted his supercilious guardian, and galloped victoriously into the Windy City. Riding his best horse, Poison, he rocked down Michigan Boulevard to Buffalo Bill's Exposition grounds. Cheering Chicagoans jammed the streets to welcome the winner.

Colonel Cody warmly grasped Berry's shaking hand, thrust into it the gold-filled purse, and bellowed, "Well done! The race is yours!" But Berry, as he slumped unconscious at the showman's feet, was beyond caring. Berry was snoring when Joe Gillespie staggered up on foot, pushing his horse, and pursued by three hysterical officials of the Humane Society.

Also rans were C. W. Smith and J. W. Albright, both of Nebraska. None of the other eight starters got out of Iowa, and Albright was promptly disqualified when it was shortly discovered that he had shipped his horses from DeKalb in a box car.

But it was a great record that the two finishers hung up. The route was 1040 miles long; Berry made it in 13 days and 16 hours, averaging 75 miles a day.

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TOM ROAN

CHAPTER

1

Get Hassett!

It was mid-afternoon and there was a fight going on when Old Lance Hassett rode into Hogtown. He pulled up his Powdersmoke horse at the lower end of the street and sat studying the situation for a few moments. Then he swung into the public stables at his right.

The mob up the street must have numbered forty men, bullwhackers, traders, buffalo hunters, buckskinned rowdies, and just plain town hang-ons of that unpredictable

variety in dress, garb, slump and swagger one saw everywhere on the Montana-Dakota frontier in the '70's.

Hassett watched two black-bearded giants stand back to back, their fists flying and hammering as they knocked and battered a small circle of men into dusty wads on the ground around them.

Then Hassett let out a grunt of surprise as he saw them suddenly turn and lam away at each other like fighting wildcats until one knocked the other sprawling and promptly kicked him in the face to keep him down.

A detailed black and white illustration showing a team of four horses pulling a mail coach through a treacherous, rocky mountain pass. The horses are harnessed together, and the coach is being pulled up a steep, uneven incline. The background features jagged rock formations and a sense of a wild, untamed environment.

OLD DEVIL HASSETT RIDES THE MAIL

Sliding tons of rock thundered into Hell Slide Bend. . . .

Lance Hasset found Hogtown a likely place . . . till he met a face-kicking marshal, a beautiful lady with a shadowy past—and a wild crew of snake-mean buffalo hunters, itching for a fight.

"Whut started it?" Hassett asked the stableman.

The stableman leaned against the door jamb and casually picked his teeth with a goose-quill.

When the stableman showed no intention of answering the question, Hassett added sourly: "Yuh did hear me, I reckon?"

"Why, yeah, I been hearin' yuh." The stableman half-straightened, and then sagged back against the jamb. "Nothin'."

Huh?" Hassett's old eyes widened. "Nothin'—whut?"

"Yuh axed whut started it," the stableman sighed. "I figgered yuh meant the fight up the street—an' I told yuh. I never let fights, or whut starts 'em, bother me. Yuh don't last long when yuh go 'round lettin' things bother yuh in Hogtown."

Hassett asked, "How many will get killed before that ruckus peters out?"

"Oh, that?" The stableman took his goose quill from his mouth and looked at it thoughtfully, as if it had something to do with his manner of reckoning things. He finally sighed and returned the pick to his mouth. "Just ain't no tellin'. From the gun-shootin' some little while ago, I'd say there's maybe one or two done dead. The rest may just fold up in a good fist-an'-skull fight. Wanta put that hoss up here? Costs a dollar, hay an' oats. Oats come high, river rates bein' what they are, then the long haul from Hard Luck. Mighty few have grain on the frontier."

"An' only a spry fella like yuh," Hassett grinned, "would carry it in stock. Yeah, I'll take a feedin'. An' where's a good place for me to eat? I been in the saddle most all day."

"Ain't a good place in Hogtown," the stableman told him. "Mought as well try Hunky's crosst the street. He's at least fillin', but sometimes powerful belly-achin'."

Hassett went out grinning. A glance up the street showed him that the fight had just about come to an end. Followed by four huskies carrying yardlong clubs, a big, redheaded fellow with a six-shooter at each hip and a sawed-off shotgun on his arm was taking charge. His four huskies clubbed down every man who resisted arrest.

The redhead would be Marshal Cadmus Calley, Hassett guessed. A little later, after a battle with Hunky's grub, Hassett would probably have to meet this Mr. Calley—de-

spite all warnings to keep out of his way as long as possible. Calley was a two-gun fighting man who had established a whirlwind reputation as a trigger-expert from the Black Hills to 'way up near the headwaters of the Upper Missouri.

CALLEY was handling the affair up the street as if such things were as familiar to him as the nose on his face. At once Hassett had noticed that the marshal was not doing any of the real work. He was simply bossing the show, nodding toward this man and that and keeping the shotgun on him while one of his brawny backers stepped up and swung his club. It seemed no time at all before Calley and his clubbers were marching a string of men ahead of them and turning into the mouth of a narrow alleyway on the northward side of the street.

An enormous man had stepped out of the doorway just beyond Hassett. "They've got money, them has." One would have known at once that this was Hunky, even without the greasy apron sawed around his barrel-like middle. He was about fifty, his head bullet-shaped, a wad of unkept black hair growing on the tip-top of it like a monkey's cap. After one close glance at Hassett, Hunky was all apology, a man who had spoken out of turn in a moment of excitement and was now trying to correct his mistake. "Only I ain't the one who'd be sayin' that those jaspers were arrested just 'cause they can pay a fine! I ain't a side-taker—not agin Cad, I mean. I guess yuh know Cad's a hell of a fine fella!"

"I wouldn't know, nope." Hassett looked at him with a frown. "I'm just hungry an' was told yuh could feed me. Stranger in town, yuh see, an' I don't yet know anybody."

"Well—well, come in, come in!" Hunky was at once all smiles and bubbling friendship. "Set yoreself, pardner!" He waved to a greasy counter at the left of the lopsided doorway. "Best eats west of Saint Joe! Specials today, too. Boiled beans an' baked, bean soup an' bean puddin'—an' fresh hawg meat just kilt this mornin'."

"Frontier's shore lookin' up." Hassett forked himself on a stool and tilted his big hat on the back of his head. "Ain't often yuh see fresh hawg meat in the most of these places."

"Bailey boys get the credit for that in Hawgtown," explained Hunky, beginning to stir something in a big pot on the stove. "Fetched in two wagon loads of big, fine sows last fall, an' now they're really in the hawg business. Just take yore hat an' sorter fan the flies back if they bother yuh too much while I pour yore soup. It's the best damn soup yuh ever tasted."

"But—but maybe," Hasset was already fanning, "I don't want any bean soup, Mr. Hunky."

"In heaven they don't make it better!" Before a man could blink, a bowl of it was on the counter. "It's got meat in it, salt an' pepper, an' lots of things to give it flavor an' what's called aroma. Eat some. If yuh don't like it, I can dump it back in the pot just like I do for others."

"It smells good," Hasset grinned. "Would yuh mind takin' yore apron or somethin' an' fannin' some few of these flyin' critters back while I blow an' taste?"

The soup was good, and the flies were no worse than one saw in the most of the little eating places on the frontier. In a minute or two a hungry man could like Hunky. He was lumbering and harmless, a gentle ox who liked to think of himself as one of the Big Swim Boys, the glad-hander to whom life had not been too bountiful but a man willing to try to get along and make the best of his lot.

"An' there goes Ace Hall, the stableman," Hunky nodded toward the window as he sat a big platter of boiled beans and pork on the counter. Hasset glanced out the window, then stared. A near-amazing change had come over the stableman. All the man's sleepiness had vanished. He was walking rapidly, somehow reminding Hasset of a gopher going somewhere in a devil of a hurry.

"I kinda had in mind," Hunky was explaining, "that he'd be goin' 'fore this to report to Cad. Look now." He put his big hands on the counter, voice suddenly confidential. "It ain't none of my business, but yuh wouldn't be a one-time Indian fighter an' an army scout fella, wouldja?"

"An' why not?" Hasset stopped eating and looked up a, scowl twisting his lean old face. "Most ever'body who lives long on the frontier does such things now an' then—"

"But I'm thinkin' of one fella in particular." Hunky again glanced at the window

and the door. "Some punchers was in here talkin' today, right about twelve o'clock eat-in' time. They kinda expect the fella I'm thinkin' about to be on the five o'clock stage, but there was some talk that he might come in on his own hoss. All I know is that he's supposed to be older'n hell, uglier'n hell an' yonder meaner—an' his name's Hasset. Lance Hasset, sometimes called Old Devil Hasset."

"An' if this here Hasset does come?"

"I'm hopin' he don't." Hunky turned and poured him a cup of coffee from a black pot. "Hogtown's set to kill hell out of him—an' Hogtown ain't the failin' kind when it comes to murderin' an unwanted man. How about some baked beans? Brother, they're shore wonderful!"

"Well, set 'em out if yuh just have to, Hunky." Hasset grinned again. "I et polecat one winter when I was snowed under in the Rockies. After the eleventh day without grub it goes down right well."

CHAPTER

2

Two Bad Men

"But about this Hasset fella, now," Lance Hasset was beginning to do a little prying and fishing for himself when he finished the baked beans and another big chunk of pork. "What's so amighty bad about 'im that Hogtown's all set to gun 'im?"

"He's a deppity U. S. marshal, they say."

"An' that's bad enough," Hasset chuckled, "to shoot a man most anywhere on the frontier, I reckon. How'n hell did yuh happen to decide I looked like the fella?"

"I didn't decide." Hunky wearily fanned at the flies and glanced toward the window again as if expecting trouble. "All I was goin' on was what them punchers said. They said he was older'n hell, uglier'n hell an' some damn sight or two damn sights meaner. Yuh kinda fitted the bill all 'round. Only now"—he was catching himself rapidly—"I ain't meanin' no offense! No, gosh, no! I wouldn't hurt nobody's feelin's!"

"Hunkey," Hasset reached across the counter and slapped him on the shoulder, "yuh ain't hurt nothin'. I know I ain't the best lookin' man on Gawd's green earth. Maybe I just beat the most of 'em. I'm some little past childhood, too, but I've

still got distance to go to catch up with Methuselah, the fella which the Bible claims lived to be nine hundred an' sixty-nine year' old. Give me time an' maybe I'll catch 'im yet."

"But—but yuh ain't Hassett!"

"In a hundred towns an' places an' such," Hassett frowned, "up an' down this Montana Territory and the Dakotas, an' even as far as Wyomin', I ain't yet had cause to deny a good name. I'm Hassett, yeah, an' I don't figger I've come to Hogtown to get my pants kicked off without a damn good fight on somebody's hands."

"Lord! I feel it a-comin'!" Hunky had fired another glance toward the window and was now like a man rigidly bolted to the floor as he stood and stared, the color draining from his face. "Ace Hall musta figgered yuh out in his own way or he's seen yuh somewhere. Here comes Cad Calley down an' acrost the street now. An' Ace sneakin' it back to the stables, his dirty work done."

"Please go outside, will yuh?" Hunky wheeled back, looking like a man ready to start yelling from sheer fright. "Don't bother payin' for the grub! Cad'll just about bust counter an' stool, if he starts to mop the floor an' walls with yuh in here!"

"But I et yore grub, Hunky." Hassett arose and took a handful of silver from his pocket. "Yuh name the figure an' I'll pay. Them was mighty good beans. I've et 'em so long on the frontier, I know. The hawg meat was good, too. First fresh kind I've had in three months, I swear. How much do I owe yuh?"

"A dollar's a-plenty." Hunky rocked back against his stove. "Hell, it's too late now. Cad's almost right at the door. Lie quiet when yuh fall. Sometimes he ain't so awful bad at kickin' a fella's teeth out, if he don't try gettin' up too soon."

And then, scooping up a silver dollar while Hassett pocketed the rest of his money, Hunky grabbed a dishrag and was briskly mopping the counter—when the marshal walked in.

Marshal Cad Calley was a handsome fellow, carefully shaven and powdered, his hair oiled and perfumed by a little Mexican barber up the street. "Hello, Hunky!" Calley's big smile stretched from one ear to the other as he leaned one elbow on the counter, ignoring Hassett entirely. "How's the bean business coming along?"

"Just fine, Marshal, just fine!" Hunky was fighting with himself to appear jovial. "Strange fella had 'em baked an' boiled. Could I set yuh out a nice batch on the house—an'," his eyes brightened, "a rich hunk of my fresh hawg meat with it?"

"On the house, eh?" The marshal was still ignoring Hassett, but his leaning figure was barring the way to the door. "No, Hunky, not in your fly dump. It's all right probably for hogs that'll eat hogs, but I like my food where men eat."

"An' me, I'd kinda like to get out." Hassett had moved toward the door as far as he could, the marshal's big figure still blocking the way. "The air seems to have gone sorter bad since yuh come in, Calley."

"Who's the friend, pal, chum or whatever you call it?" The marshal jerked his head toward Hassett, body unmoving.

"He—he's just a stranger," gulped Hunky. "Don't—know what his name is, Cad!"

"But me, now, I do." It was Old Devil Hassett beginning to growl now, knowing that he was in a trap and that soft words were not going to get him out of it. "I'm Lance Hassett—an' I'd still kinda like to get outa here where the air's fresher."

"Lance Hassett!" Now the marshal stirred, eyes growing big with mock surprise. "Not *the* Lance Hassett! *Shake!*"

The big hand came forward so rapidly Hassett had no alternative other than to grasp it, cupping his own hand at the same time for the sudden shock of a fierce grip he could see shining wickedly in the marshal's round-button eyes.

"This is a pleasure, Mr. Hassett! An honor, I am sure! Oh, a very great honor!"

"Kinda nice at that, Marshal." Hassett was not yet gripping, but his cupped hand was like iron. "I sorter got the idea yuh was a tough fella when yuh walked in. Mighta knowed better, yuh all shaved an' powdered up—an' smellin' as sweet as one of them back-alley honkatonks."

"You're maybe not funny, Hassett." An incredulous glint was coming into Cadmus Calley's eyes, the big grin beginning to falter about the corners of his wide mouth. "Your grip seems weak. Something like a dead fish-tail."

Hassett grinned in his face. "An' yores don't seem too good. I've been hearin' tell of it. A fella in Hard Luck said yuh could

shake hands with all the big uns an' have 'em on their knees on the floor yellin' like mad in the shake of a tail. Yuh ain't had no settin'-back spell of sickness, have yuh?"

"No, damn you!" The marshal gave his hand a sudden wrench. "Hit floor, you old buzzard!"

"YUH got to have a yonder better grip than that, Calley." Hassett was still grinning in his face. Hunky was worried and crowding back against the wall at the end of his stove. A crowd was beginning to

gang up outside to stare through the window and the doorway.

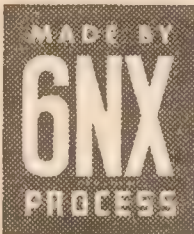
"Somebody musta made a big mistake." Hassett's grin had changed to a chuckle. "I was told they had a man in Hawgtown."

"Hit floor, damn you!" Again there was that sudden, fierce wrench. "Hit floor—Damn you, Hassett—let go!"

Lance Hassett had taken full advantage of that second wrench. He had switched from a cupped holding grip to the real thing, the long and gnarled old hand a crushing steel claw suddenly at work.



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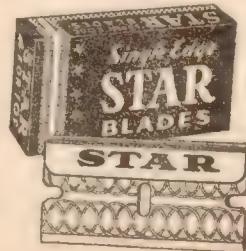


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Face going ghost-white in a flash, Cadmus Calley's knees had shot forward. As if he had been struck with a hammer he was on the floor, left hand slamming forward to try to help his right—and having no effect at all on that one gripping steel claw.

"Let—let me go!" Calley's wail now could have been heard from one end of the street to the other. "Damn you, Hassett, you're crushing my hand—into—a—*pulp!*"

"It was what yuh aimed to do with mine." Hassett's tone was low, untroubled. "Up now like a good fella."

And Cadmus Calley came up as if something in the floor shot him to his feet. His left hand was still desperately pawing and scratching to help his right, unable to turn loose for an instant and try to get a fast blow into that leering old face.

In a moment all Hogtown was seeing something Hogtown had never seen or believed possible. Hassett was backing Cadmus Calley out the doorway of Hunky's. Hassett was using but one hand while the marshal still struggled with two. The gathered crowd fell back in a big half-moon shape to give them room. Hassett kept backing the marshal on, step by step, until they were in the middle of the street.

And now, ankle-deep in the dust in the middle of the street, Hogtown saw something else. Hassett sawed the big, handsome marshal upward again. Before an eye could blink, Hassett's long left arm was curving forward, the fist an iron ball on the end of it.

The blow caught Cadmus Calley squarely on the jaw. As he started to sink to the ground, Hassett's right hand jerked loose, became an iron ball, and landed with a sickening smack to the marshal's nose and mouth. Then, stepping lightly but not too hurriedly, the old scout moved to one side to let Cadmus Calley pitch face-forward in the dust, a cloud of it puffing up around him.

"They told me I'd find a bad fella here in Hawgtown." Hassett looked at the crowd with his wicked little grin. "Now yuh fellas have got two of such critters—an' with just a mite of proddin', I'm both of 'em. Maybe somebody can tell me where to find the office of the Silver Bench Stagecoach Company?"

At least six men turned, their mouths open, eyes vacant and staring as they pointed it out to him. It was a narrow, two-

story, log-walled and sod-roofed building on the north side of the street a few doors above Sam Rodney's Saloon.

"Mighty obligin' of yuh," Hassett said. Then he was heading up the street, the crowd opening to let him go, and Cadmus Calley still lying like a dead man with his face buried to the ears in the dust.

No one thought of trying to stop Hassett. For a long half-minute no one thought of picking up Cad Calley or at least rolling him over on his back to keep him from dry-drowning himself in the dust. They stood and stared, no man in the crowd yet being able to make himself actually believe that such a thing had happened or ever could happen in Hogtown.

CHAPTER

3

Bull Wants Blood

"And that's Lance Hassett—Old Devil Hassett!—come to Hogtown to ride shotgun guard in the race for the mail contract?" Bank Kenny's face twisted.

"That's Lance Hassett," corrected the short, bald-headed little man known as Anvil Drew, his breath quick and his eyes still shining from the startling sight he had seen down the street, "who has come to *Silver Bench—not Hogtown*—to see that there is fair play in that race. And with fair play, we've simply got to win."

"So I see." The larger man sat in a chair, black-booted feet cocked on the low upstairs window sill of the stage company with his handsome white hat on the back of a curly, rusty-red head. His black coat and pale doeskin trousers were carefully pressed. His shirt glittered with black and white checks, a soft yellow tie at his throat and a watch chain as large around as his thumb spanned his stomach. "And so, of course, I hope."

Bank Kenny was about thirty and a decided contrast to his short and bald little partner in the Silver Bench Stagecoach Company. Kenny was a six-footer, wide and deep-chested, always shaved, a good dresser according to the style of the frontier—a man sometimes mistaken at a distance for Cadmus Calley, the town's duly elected marshal. Bank Kenny, according to those supposed to know, was the dash and the brawn of the stagecoach partnership; the little and never very impressive Drew furnishing only the brains and the money.

It was Anvil Drew who had started all the movements to change the name of Hogtown—and was still trying to change it. It was Drew, also, who had had the foresight to buy the steel door and walls and have the vault poured and set up in stone and concrete behind the lower floor of the express office to give Hogtown its little bank.

Anvil Drew believed in this little town on the benchland. He believed in the name he wanted for the town—and not merely because, as some had it, his gloriously red-haired, young and pretty wife had said that it looked like a great silver bench with morning sunlight upon it.

Silver—and a pinch of gold here and yon—had been discovered in the coulees along the slopes of the bench. And one day, Anvil Drew hoped, the town would grow into a decent, thoroughly law-abiding little city and not simply peter out and soon be forgotten as so many places were doing on the frontier.

He grabbed his small hard hat now and hurried to the narrow stairs at the rear of the room, looking perhaps like a keg scampering away on his short legs, the frocked tails of his faded blue coat beating almost to his heels. In a few minutes Anvil Drew was back, the long and lean old Hassett behind him.

Bank Kenny took time to carefully flick the ashes from his long cheroot before he arose and extended his hand. "So you're Hassett?" he smiled. "An amazing man—a most amazing man—from all Anvil Drew tells me, Hassett."

"Mr. Kenny," Hassett's face twisted into a little grin, "Mr. Drew maybe sometimes sorter overplays his hand. I'm only amazin' in one thing, an' that's because"—his grin widened—"it's been said I've took so long in gettin' kinda old."

"But we saw it, Lance!" Anvil Drew's eyes were still beaming as he rubbed the old man's back. "The most unbelievable thing that has yet come to Silver Bench! We can guess what started it. In fact, we know! Cad Calley's only an infernal bully. He bullies or fights everybody who comes here."

"And yet," half-agreed Kenny, moving on to the thick table in the center of the room to cock himself on the side of it, one golden-spurred foot beginning to swing, "the people still elect him as marshal each

time we try to get rid of him and find a decent man to come up here to Hogtown to fill his place."

"I wish," Anvil Drew frowned and half-kicked the floor, "you would stop calling it *Hogtown*!"

"But it's still the name!" Kenny removed the cheroot from his mouth and looked at it thoughtfully, then up at Hassett with a quick little laugh. "Anvil is bull-headed, Hassett. He sees this benchland a great and shining cathedral, a monument to the Great Drew long after he has departed from this earth."

"I—I see it," stammered Drew, getting very red of face, "as a monument to only the decency of mankind!"

"Yes, of course." Kenny again looked at his cheroot thoughtfully. "We already have about a dozen good wells dug up here, an ample water supply for the mere sake of lowering and lifting buckets, and you want to bring in the machinery for a larger well and a pump house down near the creek so we can assure the shiftless that all they have to do is to twist a cock in their kitchens and have the water come squirting out without effort."

"I'm slightly more practical," Kenny laughed again. "Let the shiftless shift for themselves. Hogtown, Silver Bench—or whatever else we might name it—is merely another frontier gamble. These places come, boom spread like fungus on a rock, and then dry up and blow away. I'm for taking what we can, while we can, and moving on to the next fair diggings. I'm practical, *damned* practical."

"Me, now," Hassett was looking at him with his queer little grin, "I wouldn't know 'bout all them things, Mr. Kenny, though maybe I'm like yuh, sorter. I seem to be allus goin' or comin', but, of co'se," he opened his long old hands, "I ain't much to look at for the trials an' what may be called the mistakes. I come up here," he glanced at Drew, "to have somethin' to do in a race for a mail contract."

"Rightly so, Lance!" Drew patted the buckskinned old back again. "We want an honest stage line, one and only one, not two, three or even four now and then, and everybody fighting and clawing at each other's throats for passengers, mail and express."

"We want a monopoly," nodded Kenny. "That's the size and chunk of it, Hassett,

and you're supposed to be the wonder who's going to help us win the monopoly. But I see Cad Calley's up and out of the dust." He arose and walked to the window. "If we're to judge by the past, perhaps we'd better think of what we're going to do about Cad within the next few minutes."

MARSHAL Cad Calley had taken a devil of a time to come out of it. There was still one of those half-dazed, half-wondering expressions in his eyes. He rubbed at his jaw and spat as if trying to remove a steadily growing goose egg from his mouth.

Willing hands had picked him up from the dust in the middle of the street. He had been carried to Hunky's door and eased down on the top step. Hunky, himself, had come forward with a towel dipped in cold water, and had carefully mopped away the dust and blood.

Another man had been more thoughtful. He was a little, bucktoothed fellow with a forelock of corn-colored hair hanging down over his eyes. He had raced up the street to Rube Parker's Far West Saloon, returning with six ice-cold bottles of beer with their corks pulled.

The marshal had shoved Hunky away from him, cursed him out of the side of his mouth, and pawed for the beer. He had finished the sixth bottle, tossing the empties to the right and left, when a bullish surge brought him to his feet, his eyes glaring wildly at the crowd, big hands pawing at the butts of his big six-shooters.

"Where ish 'e?" he snarled, the voice not belonging to him at all. "Ssthand bach un gimme room!"

"He's gone, Cad!" The bucktooth answered him. "Up the street to Anvil Drew's— Oh, *Cad!*"

"Gishway from me!"

Calley had struck out with a furious, back-handed blow, catching the little bucktooth across the face, knocking him sprawling at the feet of the crowd. A short, bull-necked man at the edge of the crowd shot a foot forward, and the little man yelped from the sudden kick that caught him in the middle of the back.

"Damn it, Chit," wailed the little fellow, "yuh had no right to kick me! I—"

"Yuh leave Marshal Calley alone!" yelled the bull-neck, one of those types of humanity who would attempt to curry fu-

ture favors at the slightest opportunity. "Quit botherin' 'im. Marshal Calley's been hurt, an' yuh quit botherin' Marshal Calley, I tell yuh, Half Man Jones."

"But—but I didn't bother 'im!" whimpered the little fellow, himself one to curry favors but now flinching away from another kick. "I'm his chum! I went an' brought 'im the cold beer! Didn't I bring yuh the beer, Cad? Ain't I yore chum? Ain't—"

"Dry up, damn it!" Calley shook his head, clearing the fog, some of his own voice surging back to him, eyes beginning to blaze. "Come here to me, Chit Brasher! I saw yuh kick Half Man."

"But—but, Marshal Calley," Chit Brasher was trying to back into the crowd, "I thought he was botherin' yuh! I—I wouldn't have nobody botherin' yuh—"

"Shut it!" roared Calley. "*Come here!*"

"Naw, yuh don't, Chit!" A big, black-bearded man in buckskins just behind Brasher had caught him, giving him a push as he still tried to back away. "Can't yuh hear Mr. Calley callin' yuh?"

"But—but *Marshal Calley!*" It was Brasher's turn to wail now, his eyes popping as he was flung forward. "*Mister Calley—*"

"Hit dirt, on your knees!" cut in the marshal. "*Hit dirt!*"

"Marshal Calley, *p-p-please!* Mister Calley—"

Brasher had stumbled and was down on his knees, both hands lifted, half-mad with terror, a lost soul praying in a wilderness. Cad Calley cut him short with one furious kick that caught him in the face and mouth, flopping him backward in the dust.

"And now," the marshal flicked back his powerful shoulders, "I guess that settles that! I'll have nobody kickin' my friends around—*nobody*, you hear!" His voice roared out over half the town. "Half Man did bring me the beer, and Half Man Jones is my friend."

"Give me room!" He surged forward, the crowd parting and scattering like scared goats clearing the way for him. "I'm going up the street and kill a man with my bare hands. Don't anybody butt in on this unless he wants to die quick. *Do you hear?* This is Cadmus Calley talking—and you know what that means!"

And then, the way open for him, his own close cronies scared of him now, he headed

up the street, reddish eyes on the two-story little sod-roof. The crowd slowly and hesitantly began to follow at a safe distance to see the show.

* * *

"You don't want to go down there, Lance!" Anvil Drew gripped the old left arm beside him, eyes going big and round as he watched Cadmus Calley coming up the street, the crowd behind him. "We'll close the shutters on all the windows and lock the doors! All except the upper window in front! I'll try to talk to them from up here! Maybe Bank can help me. You don't want to go down there!"

"That's twice yo've said I don't," said Hassett, grimly, old voice steady as a rock. "Once was enough an' more. I plum fair hell don't wanta go down, but it's one of them things what must be done."

"But—but they'll kill you, Lance!"

"They may." Lance Hassett looked at him thoughtfully. "They may, for a fact. But," he shook back his shoulders, "I've got me a queer religion or somethin' kinda like it. I believe if it's aimed for me to die today—then all hell ain't agonna stop 'er. But, on the other hand," he grinned, "if it ain't in the cards for me to die, then I ain't dyin'."

"Look, Hassett!" Bank Kenny, his own face pale, grabbed him now. "It may be one of your great and brave acts, and, again, you may not know the meaning of fear—"

"Fear?" Hassett looked at him owlishly. "Why, I'm clear nigh scared to death right now, Mr. Kenny, but I can't let Cad Calley an' his pack of monkeys know it. Nope, I've just got to go down an' face Mr. Calley an' his bunch. 'Cause if it's blood Mr. Calley just has to have, then it's blood the big bull's gonna get."

Pushing them both out of his way, he walked forward and down the stairs. If it had not been for the growing noise in the street they might have heard him humming softly to himself:

*"There's a temple shinin' bright an' fair
Standin' on the top of yonder golden
stair . . ."*

CHAPTER

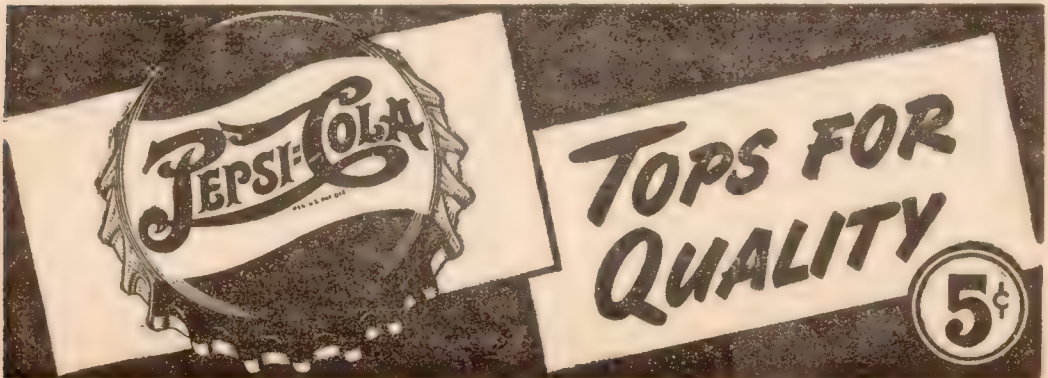
4

That Man Hassett

"You had old Hank Murphy send him here from Hard Luck." There was the hint of a cruel little smile on Bank Kenny's face as he looked out the window and down again on the advancing mob in the street. "Let the blood of Lance Hassett be on your hands, Anvil."

"We're not trying to establish a monopoly for the sake of anything but the good of all concerned." With Hassett gone below, a strange, almost dark calm had come over Anvil Drew. "Passenger rates to Hard Luck before we took a hand in it ran a dollar a mile, express fifty cents a pound, and any type of freight was not less than forty dollars a ton—and going higher. We lowered it to five. We cut the express to ten cents. A passenger—"

"To five dollars, including his luggage," nodded Kenny, eyes still on the crowd below. "Don't go over things I already know too much about as it is. Just think of what happens to our stages and freighters, how they're held up and robbed, our freighters shot and their wagons burned, the freight burned with it or stolen—and us left to pay the bills. This time you've bitten off more than you can chew, Anvil. Cad Calley will kill Hassett—"



"And it was you who brought Cad Calley here! Well, this time I may have to draw blood, but I won't see Lance Hassett die alone."

It was a surprise, probably even to himself, when Anvil Drew turned away from the window to cross the room and take down two sawed-off shotguns from a rack on the wall. Bank Kenny could only turn and stare at him with slowly widening eyes. In a couple of seconds Kenny was laughing at him.

"Anvil Drew," he clamped both hands to his stomach, holding himself as if to keep from shaking apart, "two-gun shotgun killer of Hogtown! I never thought I'd live to see this day!"

"Nor I," nodded the little man, walking to the front window. "God save me from an evil act and save me yet from the shedding of another man's blood!"

At the window he stood the guns down at either side of him. His lips still moved, but no words were coming now. They moved even faster when he looked out and down and saw Hassett.

Lanky Dave Knight, the bookkeeper, had closed the front door as Hassett stepped outside, still humming his little hum. Cad Calley was not more than forty yards away now, the mob behind him getting bolder, their eagerness to see it all robbing them of some of their fear for the marshal and letting them close the most of the distance between the crowd and his heels.

Lance Hassett was simply standing down there waiting, thumbs hooked over the brassy buckles of his worn belts, his old Remingtons hanging just as they were when he was upstairs. There was something about him down there that made Anvil Drew bite his lip as if in pain. Lance Hassett looked so old and so terribly alone down there.

"You tricked me, you dirty old devil!" Calley's voice was suddenly filling the street. "You tricked me with brass knucks or—or something!"

"Yeah, it was somethin', Mr. Calley." A queer little smile warped the left side of Hassett's face; the other side was cold and hard, like something roughly hacked out of rock. "I hit yuh with my fist."

Calley stopped at twenty feet, his head lowering, shoulders humping, the wild yelling and snorting gone out of him, giving a

low, deadly earnestness to his tone. "I'm going to kill you, Hassett, with my hands. Just my bare hands." He held them out, two big scoops that somehow reminded one of the antlers of a moose, and then he was slowly knotting them into powerful mauls of fists. "I won't need a gun or a knife. I've told my crowd to keep out of it. Just my hands, Hassett, just my two good old fighting hands."

"An' that makes four times yo've spoke of hands, Mr. Calley." Old Lance Hassett had not stirred an inch, his face unchanging. "It's kinda nice, knowin' yuh ain't goin' to yell for no help, but I've got to sort of wonder there. Seems to me there was never a damn thing about yuh that was true or could be."

"Get ready, Hassett, I'm coming!" The marshal was moving toward him as he spoke, head getting lower between those humped shoulders. "It'll be only when you reach for a gun that I'll go for one—or one of my men'll kill you!"

"An' there," Hassett nodded, "yo're callin' for help a'ready. Don't rush me right off my feet, Mr. Calley. I'm kinda old an' rockish on my feet an' yuh outweigh me 'way yonder enough to smash me agin this wall if yuh rush hard enough."

STARING down on them from above, shotguns forgotten for the moment, even Anvil Drew could guess that a rush was exactly what Lance Hassett wanted. Many fights had happened here, but Anvil Drew had never been able to watch them closely. Something about them made him sick at his stomach, not exactly scared, just sick when men started to maul and pound and kick each other to ribbons.

Unstirring down there yet, Hassett seemed the perfect target. He waited until the marshal—suddenly a charging bull—was almost right upon him. Now Hassett poked out his left fist, the marshal's set arms shoving it aside as water would spurt from a bullet striking its surface. Hassett moved, carried to one side by the marshal's flying weight. His foot shot out at the same time. Cadmus Calley tripped, snorted in dismay as he was falling, and lunged head-first against the heavily barred door.

When Cad Calley came up, dazed from that head-first crash, he spun around automatically, the true fighting man half-out on

his feet but instinctively knowing what to do. But as Cad Calley turned it was Old Devil Hassetts waiting for him, all cocked and primed. He hit one terrific blow, a right to the marshal's already swollen mouth and jaw, and Cad Calley was down again, one hopeless cry of rage coming from him.

"Get 'im, boys!"

"Stand where you are!" Anvil Drew's voice was a wail overhead, up there now with his two shotguns rammed forward. "When you start I'll sweep that street clean with all four barrels!"

"Easy with them scatter-guns!" Hassetts had glanced up. "Don't make 'er a general, Mr. Drew! I'm doin' all right, I reckon." He had wheeled, cocked Remingtons out and on the crowd. "I want the four men there at the edge of that crowd—yuh fellas I saw swingin' clubs not so long ago. If anybody makes a move to shoot me, I'll kill yore tinhorn marshal first—an' drop what others I can afterwards!"

"Stand where you are!" cried Drew. "Stand, the rest of you!"

"In killing men with guns, Anvil," Bank Kenny's voice had a mean little warp to it, "you first see that the guns are loaded, and then you cock the hammers. Neither of those guns have been loaded for more than a month."

"Thank God!" Anvil Drew groaned. "I—I don't need them! Would you please look down there at that man Hassetts?"

CHAPTER

Lily White

5

All of Hogtown seemed to be watching that man Hassetts. Pink Sneed, Buck Ridder, Jules Nance and the even more notorious Steamboat Ike Gent had their hands lifted and were shuffling forward, their eyes bugging as they watched the old man standing over the unconscious Cad Calley, six-shooters stripped from him now and the big jail keys taken out of his hip-pocket.

Calley's four huskies knew the one terrible thing that could happen to them if Lance Hassetts pulled a trigger and killed the marshal. With the marshal out of the way, there were many men who might turn—remembering blows from clubs, kicks in their faces. And if Hogtown once did turn there

was apt to be a four-way lynching taking place.

"Pick 'em up gentle," ordered Hassetts when he had made them unbuckle and drop their belts. "Just kinda bear in mind that I don't miss when I shoot. Now, we're lockin' up Mr. Calley in his own jailhouse."

It was humiliating, downright degrading in its worst degree. Some man in the crowd laughed, but the laugh was cut short when another man turned and glared at him. Hassetts marched his men ahead of him, just as he had seen men being marched in a string not so long before.

When they came to the jail at the end of the alley Hassetts saw that it was about the biggest, stoutest thing he had ever seen. It had an outer room across the front and an even dozen cells beyond it. The bars over the window were as thick as a man's wrist, the walls of stone and thick enough for a fort.

"Unlock 'er." Hassetts pitched the keys forward, and when the door's three massive locks were opened they were stringing on inside. "Just drop a key in that corridor door now, an' go right on keepin' the peace. Yo'll live longer."

"There's a man back there somewhere that I know!" Hassetts lifted his voice, kicking the front door closed behind him. "A long, lean ol' goat with white whiskers. Buckskin Bill Brady"—his voice lifted to a shout—"yuh ol' battle-axe, are yuh still in here where yuh belong!"

"An' who'n hell," snarled back a voice from somewhere among the low, half-dark and filthy cells, "wants to know?"

"That's him!" Hassetts grinned, cocked Remingtons held back against his stomach. "Go fet him outa there."

Buckskin Bill Grady was coming forward a minute later, a lean old man with his white beard swinging, big hands knotted, eyes flashing suspiciously to the right and left—the old wolf ready to start snapping at his tormentors. When he saw Hassetts he stopped, staring and blinking in the better light. His voice was a shaky whisper when he spoke, still blinking.

"La-aance? Is—is that yuh, Lance Hassetts, yuh old hawg-eyed repobate!" His voice lifted to a yell. "Lance Hassetts!"

"Lance Hassetts!" Another voice yelled the name from the doorway of one of the cells. "Is it Lance?"

"Easy, Bill!" Hassett yelled now, stopping Brady as he started to rush him. "We've got a little job on our hands. Take them keys an' let out the men back there yuh know an' can trust—"

"Know an' trust?" Brady laughed. "Hell, Lance, I know 'em all—an' wouldn't trust one of 'em further'n I could throw a full-grown buffalo bull by the tail. They're from my buffer outfit camped a couple of miles up on the crick below the bench. Well, damn my beard," he seemed to be just beginning to recognize the rest of the men with Hassett, "am I seein' things, or ain't I!" He struck out suddenly, catching Pink Sneed on the jaw and knocking him down. "Yuh hit me—"

"Wait, Bill!" bawled Hassett. "Bring out the rest of yore body-lice crowd back there, *right now!*"

They came out one after the other, buffalo hunters, skimmers and shooters, eight of as mean-looking men as any man had ever looked at. To the last man they were bearded and dirty, each used to being armed to the teeth. Hassett and Brady had one devil of a time in keeping them from beating the heads off of Calley and his four bullies before they could be carefully searched from hat to boots and thrust into cells.

"Yuh birds ain't men nohow!" Hassett once barked. "Lettin' Cad Calley an' his squirts throw yuh in jail!"

"Men, hell!" Brady had lashed back at him. "How yuh gonna fight when the whole town gangs up on yuh like they did me? I hate this Hawgtown—an' me an' my bunch aim to get even."

"Just the chance I'm gonna give yuh," Hassett had agreed. "There's yore fightin' tools piled in the corner. Get 'em!"

THEY jumped for their fighting tools, pawing and almost coming to blows as they untangled them.

Ten minutes later they were calling Lance Hassett a double-crosser.

"Yeah, I know," Hassett grinned at them, "just how yuh feel, but I'm kinda bossin' this show. I got me a stagecoach race to run tomorrow, an' if I don't win, yore right apt to get to hatin' Hawgtown yonder worse'n yuh hate now. Yuh low-downs have just got to help me a little."

"We'll help yuh, yeah," Buckskin Bill Brady was finally agreeing for the sullen

crowd, "but if yuh don't win, Lance, don't expect us to go sheddin' tears over yore grave as we go ridin' by." He banged the floor with his heel. "Hell, Lance, with yuh on our side we could wipe this Hawgtown right off the bench. An' then," he finished, grinning broadly, a new gleam of hope in his eyes, "yuh wouldn't have to bother 'bout that race."

"Yeah! Yeah!" another man was agreeing excitedly. "Look at all the guns an' ammunition Cad Calley's got hung on the walls! With this stuff we can whip— Yeah, I see." He caught himself up sourly. "I can see it in yore eye, Lance. Yuh got a hand to play in this game, an'—an' yore gonna play it yore way."

"We mighta knowed it," added Brady hopelessly. "Lance Hassett's just a plain old fool, allus was, allus will be. But all right, Lance!" He rammed out his hand, grimly. "I guess yuh ain't askin' too much, just for us to stand behind yore back while they beat yore belly blue. Come to thing of it, though," his shoulders whipped back, a bright sparkle appearing in his eyes, "I'd shore like to be up there on that box, come mornin', when Ol' Devil Lance starts to let them wheels roll!"

* * *

"Lance, how did you do it!" Anvil Drew was there at the head of the stairs as he came up. Watching from the window, knowing that it was best to keep back, he had seen Hassett march away with his prisoners. At last he had seen the crowd come surging back out of the alleyway, then Hassett appearing, walking calmly up the street, as unconcerned as an old gander strutting across some barnyard back in Missouri.

"It was kinda simple." Hassett grinned as he paused with one foot yet below the top step of the stairway. "Calley was so mad he didn't have any sense left. He oughta whip me any day, an' with just one hand."

"But, anyhow," he shrugged, noticing the big Kenny standing at the window but not yet seeing the third party in the room, "Calley an' his bullies are in jail, an' I shoved in five more from the crowd as I come back out the door."

"They—they let you do that!"

"Couldn't quite argue about it." Hassett scratched his head and his grin grew wider. "Not with two front windows an' the door"

stabbed full of cocked shotguns an' such—an' Buckskin Bill Brady an' his wild gang behind them guns.

"I just took 'em, yuh see, as sorter holdin' pieces. An' I told 'em plain what was goin' to happen if anything happened to me or yuh or Mr. Kenny—or anybody else who's tryin' to mind his business."

"And—and," stammered Drew, "what was that?"

"Just that Bill an' his bunch would shoot the hell outa the crowd we've got in jail, an' then turn ever' gun in that jail on the rest of the damn town an'—"

"There's a lady present, Hassett!" snarled the voice of Kenny. "If Anvil Drew doesn't think enough of his wife to protect her from such vile language—"

"Forgive me, Annabell, my darling!" Drew wheeled, hands lifted. "I—I'm so excited. I didn't think to tell Hassett you had come!"

"An', Ma'am, I didn't see yuh." Hassett stepped on up and took off his old hat. "I hope yuh won't hold it agin me, 'cause—'cause—"

Lance Hassett's voice clogged. He stood there, long and lean, the old hat in his hand, his unkempt head half-bowed, his eyes two piercing, sun-faded bullets as he stared at the really beautiful woman in blue who sat at the other end of the table, her white-gloved hands clasped on the handle of a pink parasol.

"Why—why—" the woman came to her feet, one hand going swiftly to her throat, face white—"he stares—like an eagle!"

"An' I'm apologizin' agin, Ma'am." Hassett bowed from the waist, and then slowly straightened. "In all this frontier, in all ever'where, I ain't met but one more woman

so purty. She was my cousin, Ma'am, who died 'way back yonder nigh forty year' ago. For just a second, Ma'am, I was thinkin' I was lookin' at Lily White's ghost. That, yuh see, was her name. I thought it powerful purty too. Lily White."

"Forgive me, Mr. Hassett!" The woman was sweeping forward now, her soft and lacy frills fluttering. She thrust out her hand. "I—I suppose I am excited too. I—I'm sorry."

"Me, Ma'am, I know I am." Hassett took the small white hand. As the ragged shade of a knight of old, he bent and kissed her fingers.

CHAPTER

Hell on Wheels

6

They were lining up at dawn, four outfits making ready for the race. At the crack of a gun they would start, each stage carrying a little bag of mail, a bundle or box of express, and a passenger besides the shotgun guard and the driver. The stages were to be of the same size and as near the same weight as possible, each to be pulled by eight horses, a change of horses to be made at Dead Water, halfway between Hogtown and Hard Luck.

Lance Hassett was worried. He had caught about three hours sleep after midnight, and it had been just before midnight that he had heard the news of Cad Calley's passing.

"Yuh hit 'im too hard I guess, Lance," Brady had explained. "He just kept lyin' on the floor of his cell. One of the boys went in an' sorter shook 'im. He was gettin' stiff. Yo're the hardest hittin' damn fool I ever saw, anyhow. Remember the time yuh

NEXT TIME SAY

BRIGHT STAR
for a better
FLASHLIGHT
and better
BATTERIES

FAMOUS SINCE 1909



hit me at Buffalo Springs? Hell, I can still feel it."

"But he asked for it, Bill. I didn't wanta have to fight 'im."

"Even his own bunch admit that."

On the street at dawn, a long old shotgun now on the crook of his arm, Hassett stood watching. No thought of Calley bothered him. Men fought out here and died—and were soon forgotten. His worry was about the stage and the horses. There were two better outfits getting ready to take their places in the line-up.

Maybe they thought they were going to catch him napping. The horses he was to change for at Dead Water might be lame, but he was not letting them catch him there. Bill Brady had let two of his men slip away from the jail after darkness had settled, and they would be at Dead Water with eight of Bill's largest and fastest mules.

Somebody's smart trick on the stage itself had not gone overlooked. Hassett had inspected it, had found that the grease on the skins of the axles had been wiped dry, the hubs of the wheels cleaned, then poured full of sand before they were replaced.

In addition, while taking off the wheels and doing a bang-up grease job with two of Bill's men standing guard, he had discovered that the tongue had been neatly sawed half-through in three places, and some poor fool had thought he might get away with a pile of old iron from the blacksmith shop shoved into the boot.

The stage was all right now, and the horses to pull it on its way had been carefully inspected and kept under guard to see that no one got close to anything any more. The biggest fool in Hometown, he reckoned, was Anvil Drew, and he was such a nice little jigger who was apt to break right down and die if he was told too much. He was coming down the street now, his pretty wife beside him. Two of Bill's men were taking care of the stage. Bill had quietly disappeared long before.

Drew looked worried. "Hassett," he began, "we've had something come up that just about crushes me. The government observer who is to start the race informs me that it is to be fair as far as it is possible. The government's taking no part whatever, only—only to see the start—"

"Poor Anvil." The woman cut him off by taking his arm firmly. "He is trying to

tell you you can't drive or ride the box as guard. The government can't help either contestant and remain fair. You are a deputy marshal—"

"Oh, that!" Hassett scowled. "Damn it—excuse me!—won't I never live it down! I only had that job once. In a month I'd sent back my badge an' papers—"

"Hassett, you're not a deputy marshal!" Anvil Drew grabbed his arm wildly.

"Not for more'n a year, damn it," Hassett yelled, "an' don't go excusin' me for that, ma'am!"

"Hassett!" Drew grabbed him, hugging him joyfully. "Oh, Hassett!"

"Anvil," his wife touched his shoulder, "I've never seen you so happy. Dear, dear God," she closed her eyes for a moment, "don't ever, *ever* let him get hurt!"

"But I must tell him about Bank!" cried Drew. "He left at midnight for Dead Water to personally see that the change of horses would be ready when we come in."

"We?" Hassett looked at him owlishly. "Who's *we*?"

"I'm riding and holding the shotgun, Hassett, and you're going to sit up there and throw the leather! My wife's going passenger! There!" He looked across the street. "I must tell the government inspector!" And he was gone then, dashing away through the dust.

"Now I'm gonna faint or somethin'." Hassett dragged off his hat. "When—when did yuh decided on ridin' passenger, Ma'am?"

"At the breakfast table." She caught his arm, pulled herself close to him, and he saw for one instant the terror in her eyes. "You'll take us through, won't you, Lance Hassett? You'll take us through or—or, please God, kill us on the road!"

"Yuh *are* Lily White, ain't yuh?" He patted her hand. "Not my cousin Lily, of co'se, but Lily White the same. I killed my first man because of what he done to her."

"Then—then—"

"Yes, Ma'am," he cut her short with a nod. "I knowed. An' yo're a gal with a past, sorter, an' them two hossthieves found out an' have been workin' on yuh. Yeah! But yuh won't have to worry 'bout Cad Calley no more. He's dead. An' as far as this Bank Kenny—well, I got me a notion I'll be seein' him before I sail that shee-bang into Hard Luck."

"You'll protect Anvil, won't you? You'll keep Anvil from harm? He is the best man I ever knew."

"I'll do my best, Ma'am." He shook her hand away. "Buck up an' get them tears out of yore eyes. I'll do my best, *Lily White*."

TEN minutes later they were in their places, Hasset on the seat, and Anvil Drew in the box with his wife and the shotgun. There was no rule where the shotgun guard had to ride. Some one had probably overlooked that.

"Get set!" The government man on the south side of the street raised a shiny little revolver in his right hand, his watch in his left. "Go!"

The revolver popped, and they were off, the leather flying, every driver hurling it into his horses. They shot ahead of him at the start, but he took the lead on the slope, going straight down swinging leather and cutting out all the crooks of the regular trail. At the bottom the stage jumped a full yard in the air, rocked crazily, and he seemed to hold it upright by swinging his body to the right and left.

It was a straight-away here for almost two miles, but the trail was ankle-deep in dust and it was too rough along the sides for one to try to follow the edge of the trail. It was where he was going to joker them. He reached down and pulled up a coil of rope and tied one end of it to the back of the seat. The other end had a yard of log-chain tied to it. He flung it back over the top of the stage, the chain now his dust-lifter raising its hellishly blinding cloud behind.

"Yuh boys back there," he grinned, throwing leather again, "ain't maybe goin' to see us for our smoke. Git along, little hossies, git along! We'll all be goin' to see Mr. Kenny bye an' bye!"

Hasset was only eighty yards ahead of the stage behind when he roared down a dangerous slope, and into a treacherous gash in the earth called Hell Slide Bend. With towering rock slides liable to come pouring down from the steep slopes at either hand, anything passing through here had to creep, and there had been no way to avoid it without swinging southward and wasting eight or ten miles.

Lance Hasset rode with his heart in his mouth, watching right and left, expecting the worst until they struck the most dangerous place. Now he swung to his feet on the footboard with his wildest yell. It looked like certain madness when he started swinging those running, sweat-slinging horses and the stage to the right and left. It looked like murder when the rocks started to slide. Behind him there were wild yells of terror, the other stage pulling up. A scream came from the box below.

"Go, damn yuh, go!" he yelled, his long whip cracking like a rifle over the backs of the running horses. "Right on through or right on down to hell!"

He felt something jerk. His dragging rope and chain had been caught and torn away, sliding tons of rock catching it just behind those flying rear wheels of the stage, both sides of Hell Slide Bend rumbling, the earth beginning to shake.

"HERE comes the first one!" The cry lifted like a wail in front of the long, low, log house in front of the corrals on the upper side of the trail at Dead Water. "It's just now toppin' Sundown Pass! *It's Lance Hasset!*"

"Take it easy, pard." The clean-shaven man at the bar with Bank Kenny spoke softly. "We got plenty of time for just one more drink."

Always one to drink more than he could hold when out of sight of Anvil Drew, Bank Kenny had been drunk and asleep on a stool at the end of the bar. The cry from outside had startled him. He looked up as if through a fog, and did not recognize the clean-shaven man who had oozed up beside him. In the poor light no one would have recognized Buckskin Bill Brady—with a clean shave, a ginger-brown suit several sizes too small for him, the pants coming down to halfway between knee and ankle. In a wind the little brow derby would not have stayed on his head, and the high celluloid collar and red cravat seemed to be choking him.

"Yes," Kenny's voice was thick, "one more lil' drink." He reached for it, the old man steadying his hand, and managed to gulp it down. "I—I gotta get outa here. See—see that the horses are changed for the stage."

"Wouldn't bother with it," half-whis-

pered Buckskin Brady. "They won't be able to go two miles, not with the dope yo've poured in 'em."

"Dope?" Kenny rocked back on the stool. "What the hell—"

"Take it easy, yuh ain't got long." Buckskin Bill Brady was whisper-chuckling. "It ain't right to find out that a woman mighta once sung in a honkatonk an' then try to break her when she turns straight. Yo're a no-good dirty dog, Bank Kenny. I'm a buffalo hunter, an' I hope yuh kinda like the taste of my poison tube in that last drink. Ain't no use in tryin' to get up. Yo're fallin' dead a'ready on yore stool. Only me an' Lance Hassett knows the gal's past now, an' we ain't the kind to— Bartender! Bartender!" His voice lifted to a jerk. "This fella looks kinda bad!"

"Bad?" the bartender took one look. "Good Lord, he's dead!"

* * *

"How much time yuh got, Lance?" It was Brady's greeting as he came sidling up when Hassett brought the dusty stage to a gentle halt, the horses blowing but not hurt.

"I reckon the rest of the day. I shook them mean ol' mountains down behind me while comin' through Hell Slide Bend. The others will have to go back an' all the 'way 'round, if they can turn back."

"Kenny's dead." Brady was speaking low and rapidly. "Get the rest of this fast. The two fellas who're to bring the hoss string are to start gunnin' yuh if yuh see the hosses are doped. There are three others here who don't look good. They may take a hand in it right fast. My mules are waitin' in the alder thicket an' ready to be brought out when I wave my hat. Ain't it a cutter!"

"Yeah, but—but yuh said Kenny's dead. Yuh shoot 'im?"

"Hell, no." Brady shrugged. "Some hawgs maybe just drink too much with the wrong kinda stuff dropped in it. Get me a poison tube in Hard Luck, will yuh? Indians are gettin' bad. Might get caught at a shootin' stand an' wanta fade out right

quick. Watch yoreself. Here comes the hosses."

He turned back toward the porch of the house, and Hassett sidled back to the door of the stage now. His voice was low when he spoke.

"Wait a little while, then Mrs. Drew can get a drink of water. There may be a little gun-fuss before we move on, but we've got plenty of time. *Plenty.*"

Hassett sauntered on to the porch, getting his back to the wall, watching everything, seeing it all. One man was handling the reins of the horses, the other following, both with a six-shooter at either hip. He waited until they were directly in front of him, and spoke:

"How much didja get for dopin' 'em?"

It was like touching a match to powder. Both men wheeled, hands flying toward their hips. A Remington flying into Hassett's right hand killed the man who had dropped the reins. A Colt roaring from just inside the barroom dropped the second one, the horses wheeling back, running toward the corrals.

There was silence now, Buckskin Bill Brady inside the barroom, Hassett still leaning against the wall. There were three tough looking customers at the bar, but they stayed there, looking at Brady, then glancing at the dead man slumped on his stool, the upper part of him resting on the end of the bar. Two of Buckskin Bill Brady's men came from somewhere, wolves itching for a chance to fight as they sidled in to the bar. Brady spoke:

"Looks like the war's over, Lance."

"An'," Hassett nodded, "there's a lady waitin' for a drink of water, an' she's waited long enough, bless her heart."

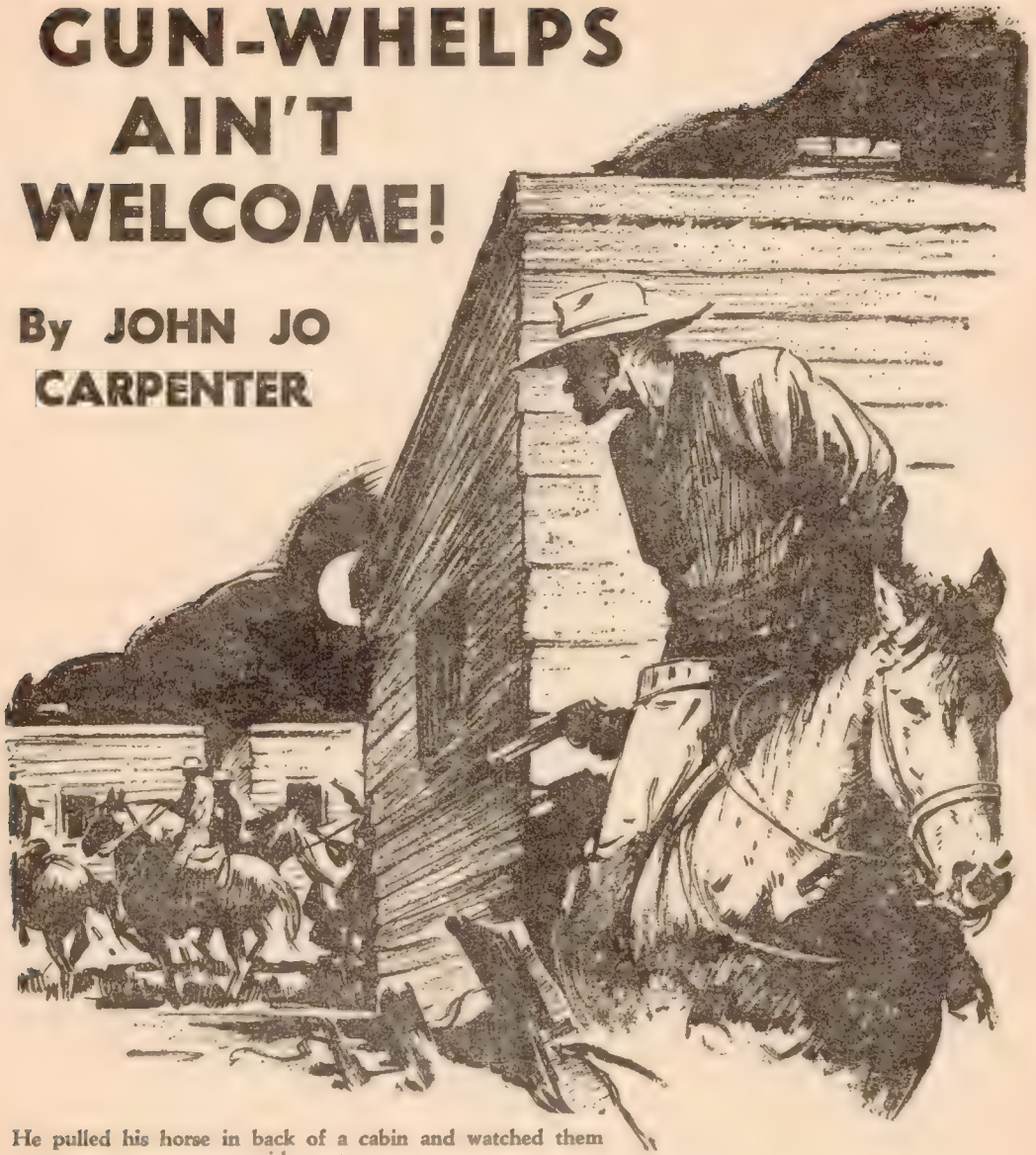
Ten minutes later he was back on the box, and eight big long mules were whipping the stage on down the trail. Anvil Drew as good as had his mail contract in his pocket, but neither Drew nor his wife yet knew that Bank Kenny was dead behind them. Some things could wait. . . .

SILVER and SANDSTONE

All men connected with mining in the early 1870's knew that silver never occurred in sandstone. But evidently "Metalliferous" Murphy, an assayer from Pioche, Nevada, didn't. Murphy's reports were always so high that many of the miners came to believe Murphy didn't know his business. In order to prove him a fake, one miner pulverized an old grindstone. Murphy's report said the sample showed 200 ounces of silver to the ton. This was too much for the miners. They drove Murphy out of town, but not before the assayer found out where the grindstone came from. And thus was opened the Silver Reef in southern Utah, which produced ten and a half million dollars.

GUN-WHELPS AIN'T WELCOME!

By JOHN JO
CARPENTER



He pulled his horse in back of a cabin and watched them ride past.



Instead of trying to live down the reputation of his gunslick father, Vern Ludlow decided to build a bigger rep for himself.



THE kid backed away, grinning as at a big joke. He was a big kid for his age, as he had always been, and he looked awkward. The grin on his face was sheepish. His clothes didn't fit. It was just as well, because they were about worn out anyway—booth heels overrun, levis threadbare, shirtsleeves so worn his big-muscled arms rippled visibly, like a skinfull of snakes.

His name was Vern Ludlow, and he was the son of the late and unlamented Pete

Ludlow, and the man who looked only at that sheepish grin and that awkward appearance was making a big mistake. The eyes were the thing to watch. They were warm eyes—even hot eyes now—and they were so deadly serious that it was indeed a very grave mistake to put too much stock in that grin.

Harry Sutton made that mistake. Sutton was the man who made the first "strike" at the Big Thumb. True, his was the first claim to peter out; but so far he had shown no willingness to go back to work in the cattle country all around, as other unlucky ones had done. He was still hanging around the Thumb, sort of unofficial Mayor, marshal, judge and jury.

But—he could make a mistake, and did. He yelled: "Vern, you fresh whelp, you limb of Satan, put down that gun or I'll beat the daylight out of you."

And he started at Vern with a stick of stovewood.

Ludlow's first shot clipped Sutton's ear. Sutton yelled and flung the stovewood. It hit the big kid on his gun-arm, and he let it. He did not dodge. The hand went numb and the gun sagged. Sutton reached for his own weapon.

Vern calmly shifted the gun to his other hand and shot again. His second slug tore into Harry Sutton's shoulder. Sutton squaled and dropped the gun. When he stooped, all full of rage and dignity and a thirst for vengeance, Vern Ludlow dropped another accurate shot on the floor. It sent the gun skidding back across the room.

Then they remembered that Pete Ludlow had been equally good with either hand. Very good!

Sutton now took a look at Vern Ludlow's eyes and realized his error. He was bleeding badly; he felt himself to be full of splintered bones; he wanted to get down to Doc Semple as fast as he could, and get picked out and pinned together again.

Instead, in obedience to those eyes, he sat down on the floor and tried not to let the nausea get the best of him.

"Lissen, you," young Ludlow was saying coldly, "and listen close, because anybody wants to interrupt, they're going to get more of the same."

They listened—a bartender who kept his hands on the counter, in plain sight, nine miners and prospectors who had been play-

ing cards at the two tables—and Harry Sutton.

"You threw my old man up to me," the cold voice went on, with nothing of boyishness in it. "You call me a two-gun cub. You Pete Ludlow me this and you Pete Ludlow me that, and you won't let me be anything else but the kind of a son you thought Pete Ludlow ought to have."

"When I tried to make a simple living, punching cows, you told it around no son of Pete Ludlow's would ever settle down long to work."

"When you made it so miserable I couldn't get a job around here, and I went to drivin' freight-team, you say to yourselves, 'Ah—that's how Pete Ludlow got his start, robbin' the Butterfield coach."

"An' when Sutton struck it rich here, and I got laid off because they didn't want no Ludlow drivin' a freight wagon, you wouldn't let me stake out a claim. You laughed at me! You run me off!"

His big face went soft for a moment, and there was a hint of quiver to his lip. However, none of them made the mistake this time of looking elsewhere than into his eyes.

"So get this! You call me a wolf cub. All right—watch out for my fangs! You got them to send me my daddy's guns from where they buried him, down in Texas! It was funny then—but I guarantee you won't laugh no more. You said gold wouldn't mean enough to a tramp kid, and you hogged the claims yourselves, and now the creek's worked out and—"

"It hain't worked out! We'll find the lode yit!" came a passionate denial from one of the prospectors in the back of the room.

Vern Ludlow turned his coldly inquisitive eyes in that direction. The man shut up, quickly. He was a typical prospector. He had panned a little gold in the riffles here, dug a little farther up the slope, and it was painful for him to believe that he had not "found it." So painful that, for a split-second, he dared the kid's malevolent anger to defend his dream.

"So you'll find the lode, eh?" Ludlow half snarled, half smiled. "And what of the dust you've found so far? All gone—spent—gambled away! Oh, it wasn't much to any of you—just a few hundred dollars, and you had your minds on millions! But

none of you thought what a hundred dollars here and there would have meant to me, did you?"

Silence fell. The miner who had spoken pulled back against the wall and tried to look inconspicuous. Another, an older man, spoke up.

"Kid," he said, "iffen we'd have knowed you'd a tooken it so hard—iffen we'd a had any *idee* the money'd meant that you—"

"I told you, didn't I?" the boy came back harshly. "And you wouldn't listen! Well, you'll listen to what I say now. And what I say is this—the first man to make a move before I'm a hundred feet out of that door gets one right between the eyes! And remember—it's Pete Ludlow's whelp that's speakin'."

The saloon had been a pump-house once, when some ambitious fool with dreams of his own had tried to run sheep here. The land went back to the wild, the pump was removed, and the shack stood empty until Sutton struck gold there. There had been no time to properly floor the place, and with his dad's coolness, Vern Ludlow felt his way very carefully, a step at a time, backward to the door.

"Remember!" he called out softly—and vanished.

HE WAS glad then that he had not taken altogether to miner's ways. He had kept a pride in his horse, in his horsemanship. Fatty—so called because he had been fat as a yearling, before devolving his present powerful muscular frame—was standing at the hitchrail, untied. Vern hit the saddle in a bound and Fatty was out and three hops away before the boy had hold of the reins.

"Fan it!" the boy said, his voice high with nervous excitement.

They gave him plenty of time to be gone, and he was far up the road, rounding the Thumb, before he looked back and saw them eddy out of the saloon. They stood looking after him. Just looking after him. He closed his lips firmly.

"Sure, you'll make it hot for me now!" he said to himself, "but you'll pick a safer time and a different place."

He rode on a little further and reined up. All around he could see lights twinkling—cabins where weary, and mostly disappointed, men, were fixing lonely bachelor suppers after it was too late to peg away after elusive gold. Here and there was the soft, slightly rosy glow of a lantern shining through a tent wall. High up on the opposite slope, a quarter of a mile beyond the creek, a light went out, came on again, went out, came on again. This was "Little Sweden," where three Swedes had teamed up to sink a long shaft back into the hill.

"In and out, wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow, day and night, until they've got a dump of two thousand tons of rock and clay. And *they* won't find it either!" he muttered fiercely.

His heart ached at his missed chance. The Swedes, like nine out of every ten claimholders, had picked up three or four hundred dollars in free gold. On some claims it had run over three thousand before petering out. The "traces" were everywhere, from the creek bed and both moist sides of it, all up the dead, scarred slope yonder.

He had honestly tried to avoid being the son of Pete Ludlow. He had just wanted a little stake—that's all. Yet they had never taken him seriously. They had



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thought of him as his father's son, a loutish nuisance now, an outlaw and professional gunman when he reached manhood.

"Well, to hell with them," he said, swallowing a throb of sickness. "I'll go see Carl Boone for old sake's sake, and then on my way."

There were two thousand miners, prospectors and hangers-on here, and they would all be afire with righteous wrath when the story got out what he had done tonight. He took a long chance in seeking Carl Boone.

Nevertheless he was figuring his chances. He was not being foolhardy. He knew they would expect him to ride, and keep on riding. The last thing in the world they would anticipate was that he would tarry anywhere, least of all in the center of the newest part of the camp.

This was Carl Boone's first claim and his last. He was a big, grizzled, schoolmasterish man; for all his lack of learning he had an odd, professorial way about him. He had kept store, worked as a Texas Ranger, done a little blacksmithing, trapped for a living up in British Columbia one fall; and in the meantime spent twenty hit-or-miss years in the saddle, from the Rio to the Assiniboine.

His place stood out from all those clustered around the Thumb, because he had taken pains to make it look permanent. He had built a tight log house, trapped a spring, built a rock wall and a sidewalk. Vern knew that Boone was looking for a home, as much as for a fortune, when at fifty-nine years he took up gold-hunting for the first time.

He came to the door of his cabin, smoking a big, curve-stem pipe and wringing out a dishrag.

"Hello, son," he called, in his rumbling voice. "Light and tie. Have you et yet? There's some biscuits left, and I saved the gravy, and it ain't cold yet. Rabbit gravy, and I claim I make the best east of the Sierras."

"Close the door. I'll just push my horse up in the dark of the trees here."

An odd expression crossed Boone's face, but he obeyed silently. He closed the door, shutting in the yellow lamplight. Vern slapped Fatty on the rump and the big horse trotted obediently into the shade of the trees, where the rising sickle moon did not penetrate. His dull-brown coat blended

perfectly, losing him. Vern slipped quickly through the door.

"What did you do now, kid?" Carl Boone said quietly. "Here's grub. This is a time to talk while you eat, I guess."

"I let Harry Sutton have it."

A painful sigh escaped Boone's big chest. "Tell me about it."

Vern stuffed his mouth with luscious biscuits and gravy and said hotly, "Well, go ahead and lecture me!"

"Afterwards, mebbe. I don't even know what you done yet. I heard a man say he let somebody 'have it' once, and it just meant he slapped him. Other times it means slow music and the wailin' of women. What shape's Sutton in?"

Vern grinned and said, "Well, if he doesn't learn to eat left-handed, he'll just purely waste away, but I don't guess it will kill him. I smashed his shoulder for him, hit the joint the way my old man used to."

"When he was just frolicsome, and not mad," said Boone. "It's—well, it's risky, unless you're a deadly shot."

"Which I am!"

Again Boone sighed, saying, "I feared so. Personally, I never give a tinker's damn if you could shoot or not. Useless talent, that."

"Ask Harry Sutton if it's useless!" Vern shot back.

Boone said nothing. He pulled at his pipe until the boy calmed, and then said, "Well, tell me about it."

"Was in Frenchy's tonight. Thought I'd play a little stud. Two games going. I got in one, Sutton was in the other. I won maybe forty-fifty dollars before I started to lose it. Was playing with Mike—I don't know his last name, you know, the one with the claim next to Doc Semple's."

"Anyway, I got a pair of eights back to back, and I picked up a third eight on my fifth card. Mike got his second jack 'in sight' on his third card, and I was dead sure he didn't have a third one. So I started betting wild, to make him think I was bluffing—"

He fell silent, thinking over the hand, stuffing himself hungrily.

"Well?"

"Well, the first thing I knew, the other game had stopped and Harry Sutton was standing behind my chair. You know how he thinks he owns this town! We must have had fifty dollars in the pot when he

all of a sudden spoke up and told Mike he'd have to quit betting and pull his money out."

"Why?" Booke's face was puzzled.

Vern swore and said savagely. "Because he said I was too much of a kid! Because he said I had bad blood in me and I shouldn't be losing my money. It would start me off like my old man, he said."

"And—?"

"He fouled the hand! Turned up Mike's hole card with one hand and mine with the other. Then he had the guts to say we ought to divide the pot, the hand didn't count. When I had Mike beat! When I had a stake, and God knows how I need a stake. Look at these clothes!"

"Well," Booke said uncertainly. "Sutton's a lot older man than you, son, and I reckon a nineteen-year-old kid should be out workin', not playin' poker."

"Working?" Vern cried. "Where shall I work? Why doesn't Harry Sutton work? His claim's petered out! I'd have worked anywhere once! If they hadn't run me off every time I tried to stake out a claim, I'd have showed them what work is! If—"

He fell silent as footsteps sounded outside. He stood up, a huge lad who looked almost comical in his tattered clothing—had it not been for the two heavy guns in their worn holsters. His finger went to his lips as he jerked his head, motioning Booke to the door. The older man got up just as a hand tried the latch. Booke was the only man in camp who had a lock on his door. He had slid the peg home after Vern's entrance.

"Who is it?"

"It's me—Ed Price," a voice answered. "Come on out, Carl. We're gettin' up a posse to go after that Ludlow whelp. He shot Harry Sutton."

"Shot Harry Sutton? Well, now, that's too bad," Booke said.

He frowned uncertainly. Plainly, Price expected to be let inside. There would be no stalling him. He looked questioningly at Vern. The boy grinned crookedly and stuffed another biscuit in his mouth.

Still chewing, he strode over and slipped the peg out of its hole—very quietly. Then he threw back the door.

ED PRICE had buckled on his own gun and criss-crossed himself with cartridge belts. He looked warlike enough until he

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saw who was standing in the door. He had not been one of those in the saloon, and he could not see Vern's eyes, but the boy looked gigantic enough against that yellow lamplight to be perfectly capable of the story that had been told him about what happened in the saloon.

"Well?" Vern trumpeted.

"I—I—don't you pull them guns on me!" Price wailed.

"You wanted me. Why don't you come get me?" the boy taunted him.

Price staggered backward, fending the light off his eyes with his crossed arm. Vern stepped out after him. Price let out a yell of terror and broke and ran. He disappeared into the darkness.

For a moment there was only the sound of his scrambling boots, beating their terrified way down the rocky trail. He would be too scared to yell the alarm even—for a minute or two.

"What are you going to do now?" Booke said sharply. "I've been against your hanging around all along. You need a year or two more of hard work, before they'll take you on your own, and forget you're Pete Ludlow's get. Now the fat's in the fire sure. Harry Sutton may be worthless, and I own he is, though you and I may be the only ones to think so. But don't forget—he made the first strike here. He's an important man. Folks'll sure blame you, son."

Before Vern could answer there came Ed Price's first palpitating yell. The words came indistinctly, but they roused the whole camp. As far away as the saloon men were yelling back. Burros brayed, dogs barked, lights twinkled by the sudden hundreds.

"Let 'em blame and be damned," Vern said bitterly. "You ask what I'm going to do. I was in a mind to ride out and live off of the country. There's enough gold goes out of here every week that one week's haul would make me rich. That's what was in my mind. Now—I don't know."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Carl said softly.

"Oh, I'm not getting moral about it! I just hate to run. I'd rather stay and fix a couple more like I fixed Harry Sutton. Do like my old man did when the Pete Ludlow string ran out—say oh to hell with it, and see how many I can take with me."

The light went out suddenly as Booke stepped inside and blew into the lamp

chimney. He came out again and took the boy by the elbow, forced him toward the trees. It was not his strength which won, but his quiet, ferocious authority. Vern was stronger, but for enough moments he was just another wriggling, disobedient boy who nevertheless would answer the determined pressure of an older man.

"You get on that hard-mouthed nag of yours," Booke said, almost savagely, "and ride, and ride—and ride! And you keep on riding, boy, until you're on the other side of the Sierras. California's the place for you! I'll meet you six weeks from now in Santa Rosa. Then we'll see."

Even in this moment, Vern knew how much this offer cost the older man. Booke had always been decent to him when no one else was. But this was Booke's home! This was where he wanted to settle down! Carl was getting old. A tight cabin, game to hunt, his own spring, a little gold to dig for, whether he found it or not—And he was offering to give up this old man's dream of his, to get Vern started out right in Santa Rosa.

"No! I won't do it! Run from them? I'll see them in hell first!"

Booke hit him. Not with his fist, but with his open hand. It was a big hand, the kind that fitted on a man six foot four. It was hard, knotted from many labors, caloused with a shell like a horse's hoof. It made the boy's ears ring, made him feel less like a man, more like a wayward child, than before.

"Don't you hit me again, Carl," he whimpered. "By the Lord, you've been like a second father to me, but I—"

Booke slapped him with the other hand. Vern quivered all over, and his palms went wet with desire for his guns. It was instinct, deep as his core; but just then Booke slapped him again.

"Get up on that horse and ride!"

Vern took a quick step backwards. There was nothing to do but obey—either that, or shoot the old man.

He turned and walked swiftly to where Fatty was a dim shadow. His fingers went under the saddle girth to test it—carefully, lest he injure one of those precious fingers, break a nail or sprain a knuckle, and make him unworthy of that lethal Ludlow draw.

The girth was tight.

He swung up in the saddle, where he towered over Booke. The older man was

standing now with his shoulders slumped, his big hands on his hips.

"I couldn't worry more if you was my own kid," he rumbled, choking over the words. "See you in Santa Rosa."

"Like hell you will!" Vern muttered to himself, as he rode off.

Fatty sensed his rider's state of mind; or perhaps there was an unusual rigidity in the boy's big body. Anyway the horse wanted to run. He danced out on the rocky slope, found the trail, stretched his big, muscular neck. Vern checked him in, made him dance and sidle slowly, taking his time.

"We're in no hurry," he said to himself. "Let's have a little party before we leave town, eh? They asked for it—they'll get it!"

He looked up at the Big Thumb, the stark rock formation which for decades had been merely a trail-mark, which for the last year and a half had been the mecca bringing thousands of maddened gold-seekers. For three months it had been a symbol to Vern Ludlow, too. Now he shook his fist at it.

AS THE horse descended, he glanced around him. The camp was laid out on the westward, the most barren, slope of the creek. East of the creek the walls were too sheer for any promise of gold; and the mesas above were even bleaker. Sutton had made his strike in a little gully which fed the creek, on the west side. There he had staked out his claim.

And the camp had grown up around him, until the entire bed of the creek itself had been staked out and belonged to someone, and the whole westward slope likewise, until it lost itself in pines. Now it was a city—a metropolis composed entirely of men. Disappointed men for the most part, easily roused to anger.

For, as the Thumb was a symbol of hope, so was Harry Sutton the symbol of lost hope. While Harry Sutton hung on, while he remained in the camp he had founded, these scratching, scrambling thousands would do likewise. Vern realized that he had shot a demi-god. It tickled him. Big-mouth, blustering lout, lazy braggart who had never willingly done an honest day's work in his life—all that, yet a demi-god, because he had found a little fistfull of gold!

"Why, I shot holes in their dreams, that's

what I did!" Vern chuckled. "Well—here they come."

Few of the men in camp owned good horses, but these few had gathered quickly. He could pick out the big tent which was Doc Semple's home—his medical office and impromptu hospital, as well as the place from which he worked his own claim.

Quite a crowd had gathered here, to view Harry Sutton's smashed shoulder, and to work up their own indignation. It was from here that the clink and chinkle of shod horses suddenly rang out, and a long file of men blinked past the lighted cubicle of canvas.

Fatty heard them, too, and wanted to run. Vern gave the horse his head. They descended rapidly now, and reached the wide trail along the creek.

A man came out of a dark cabin and called out quaveringly, "Who—who is it?"

"It's just who you think it is!" Vern called back gaily.

The man yelled and ducked back inside.

Vern put a light touch of spurs to the horse. The miner was scared, but he would quickly pop out again with a gun.

He did. It was a light rifle, and he was scared enough to shoot badly. The bullet whined off somewhere. Vern would have liked to send one back, just to give the miner something to talk about the rest of his life; but he decided against it. This fellow was a nobody. It was the solid citizens, the "Harry Sutton crowd," with their fine horses, their fine centrally-located claims, their arrogance and their self-righteousness, who had a right to the worst he could do.

He saw the posse coming, riding hard. They had not counted on him spending those few moments arguing with Carl Boone up there. They thought he would be well on his way by now. He pulled his horse off to one side, back of a deserted cabin, and watched them ride past. Near the rear was Ed Price, still trussed up in his cartridge-belts.

"Man, he looks dangerous as hell!" Vern said derisively, to himself.

He counted thirty-two of them. This sobered him. He had not really stopped to count the odds, but in his subconscious mind he had been figuring on five or six, he knew now. He swore. This was something Pete Ludlow would have done differently. Pete Ludlow, until he grew bored

with life and decided to see how many he could take with him, and never been caught in a fix like this.

"But it's what I asked for," he whispered, gritting his teeth.

He let them pass. The last was Doc Semple, half full of gin as usual, talking loudly in a squeaky voice. He had nothing against Doc. Matter of fact, there were few better fellows to know anywhere than old Doc Semple. But—

"We got to teach that pup a lesson!" Doc was squeaking alcoholically, reeling in the saddle and awkwardly brandishing his gun. "We been too easy on that good-for-nothing whelp. You leave him to me. I always did want to shoot me a Ludlow."

Vern rode out on the road behind them, as quietly as he could. Then he pulled up and shouted.

"Well? Did I hear my name mentioned?"

Doc screamed. Ed Price moaned. The posse milled wildly as the leaders pulled up, as those in the rear tried to spur on through. Someone was a quick thinker, however. He shot. Vern knew he made no silhouette, yet Fatty was a big horse and he might be knocked down by a lucky shot.

He tickled the horse and headed him straight at the posse. He chuckled as he thought how they would talk of this escapade of his for months to come. Yet it was not half as dangerous as it might appear to a posseman. *They* dared not shoot, for fear of hitting each other, and he could not miss.

He saw two horses go down, and recognized one of them as Doc Semples. He felt better—that took old Doc out of the way of trouble, then. He leaned low in the saddle and pushed the big brown gelding through them. He plucked one gun from its holster and spilled two well-spaced shots over their heads, just enough to separate them without plunging them into a panic which would bring on a wild and indiscriminate fusillade.

THEN he was through them, with the road to himself. They shot after him, and some of the slugs came fairly close. But as he looked back, as he saw the Thumb narrow and foreshorten as he drew away from it, he knew he was safe. It would take them a moment to collect their wits, and by the time they did, he would have a

lead they could not overcome. There was not a horse in camp the equal of Fatty.

"Why did I shoot over their heads?" he cursed himself. "I had the chance and I passed it up."

Suddenly a man loomed up in the trail ahead of him. Vern recognized the man by his oddly-shaped, flat-crowned hat. He was a big, silent Texan with sharp, cold eyes and a narrow, mean mouth. He had been around the camp almost a month now, making few friends, spending little time down at Frenchy's, keeping to himself.

And now Vern knew why. The Texan was one of these queerly twisted individuals who liked to kill. Whether he handled a gun well or badly, he was a killer. And Vern suspected that he would handle his rather well! The Texan would not have to pick on fumbler to find notches for his gun.

He had replaced his own gun. His hand dipped down now and he shot, and he felt the heat of the Texan's gun as it blazed at the same moment. He saw the Texan go down—not surprising, since he shot for the chest and knew he would hit it—and then something seemed to bat him over the back of the head and everything went black around him.

"*Why, this is how it feels to be hit!*" was his last thought.

The Texan's slug was high. It tore off his hat and knocked a small piece of bone from his skull, a little chip the size of a half-dime. He went slack all over. His hands went up in the air and the frightened horse jumped out from under him.

It was the fact that here the trail skirted the creek that gave him the few seconds respite he needed. One of Fatty's flying hind hoofs bruised his leg as he came limply free of the saddle. He went head-first into the icy mountain water.

He came up clawing and choking, and with red fire dancing painfully in front of his eyes. Instinct made him keep moving. The water was up to his armpits, not dangerously deep, but numbingly cold. He threshed his way to the other side, staggered up the bank and caught at a tree, waiting for his head to clear.

It had all happened too suddenly for him to understand instantly. His frightened horse was far off by now. The Texan, moaning at the top of his voice, was attracting attention from the posse down the trail. And here, where Vern was leaning,

was a little log prospector's hut, unlighted but probably occupied.

Vern felt for his guns. He had lost both of them in his tumble into the creek.

Now terror took possession of him. He ran blindly. He heard a man come out of a cabin a hundred yards off and shout, "There he goes!" He almost wept to have no gun, as the man kept up his insane bellow of alarm.

The last camp vanished—the line was narrow along this side of the creek. He tried frantically to remember what it was like here, but he was still dazed and his wits worked slowly.

"Carl! Carl Booke!" he moaned involuntarily, turning by instinct to the only friend he had in camp.

For now—Santa Rosa looked very good to him.

He heard the posse splash through the creek, heard them dismount, heard them yell orders to one another as they started out on foot. His terror deepened. He found a hand-hold in the sheer, crumbling face of the cliff and started upward.

He never knew how he reached the top, but he did. Halfway up he heard them send some of the posse back to their horses, to ride down and around the Thumb and come up to the Mesa by another way. But he did not care. All he wanted to do was reach the top.

He reached it, and pulled himself away from the edge. Instinctively he bellied forward until he found a tiny ditch, a little gully that someday, after a century of erosion, would be a canon watershed like those across the creek. And here he lay shivering, the cold air of the mesa biting at his drenched body, his head aching, his hands stiff and at the same time, trembling.

Slowly his head cleared.

The moon had come up. He sat up and looked around. It was wild and bleak and forbidding up here; no wonder even the mountain goats had shunned it. He found strength to smile crookedly.

"They laughed at me for being such a big hulk," he said, "but there's none of them big enough to scramble up after me. None with that strength! And it'll take

'em some time to come 'round the long way on horseback. I've still got time—I'll come through the middle of them yet."

The thing to do, of course, was rest—gather his strength.

He put his head in his hands and relaxed. It was this gesture which turned his eyes downward, and showed him that tell-tale twinkle in the sand.

"Gold!"

He forgot he was cold. He forgot he was wet. He forgot that a hundred men were lurking down there below him, no telling how many more riding hard to come around his other side. He dug into the loose, clayey sand in the bottom of the little gully with hands that were no longer stiff.

The last rain had formed a little crust over it, and he had broken this crust when he threw himself into the gully. Why, it was a rich pocket—he was lying on thousands and thousands of dollars worth of gold!

He jumped to his feet and looked around. "Yonder's where it washed down from—up there. This is the Lode. It all came down the side here, every grain found in the creek! That across the creek, where the camp is—that's just the shirttail end of it!" he exclaimed, in awe.

They heard him coming. They yelled at him, but when they drew their guns they did not shoot. They stood in half-terror, half-plain disbelief, as he hurled himself downward, clutching at handholds that were not there, bruising his body all over, tearing his clothes. A bootheel came off, and he limped as he stumbled toward them.

"I've found it!" he cried ringingly. "The—the Lode! And it's mine—mine—I'll show you where it is after I've staked. Find Carl Booke! Get Doc Semple over here—they're next after me. Look here!"

And—as they clustered around him, jabbering almost hysterically as the little grains of free gold winked back at them—he thought of something else.

"And then get Harry Sutton! By the Lord Harry, he founded this camp and he gets the next claim. Come on, boys—I'll show you where it is."

They never did get to Santa Rosa.



SATAN'S OWN LOOT

Jamie Foxeye was faced with a vicious desert killing—and fifty thousand dollars that belonged to Satan.



"Get away, Redskin, before I kill you."

By STEWART TOLAND

THE sun blasted down on the Dragoons, it baked all the purple out of the hollows and filled them deep with heat. Waves of it crashing against canyon walls, waves to blind a man and choke him almost as surely as though he breathed fire. And there was a man here, an old, old man stumbling on feet almost too weary to lift, over rocks and through gamma grass, he seemed a dwarf beneath a mescal plant with its spreading blooms thirty feet above the earth. And then he

was an ant falling on a cholla, lying flat and black against the ground.

It took a long time to get up, a hundred needles pinned him there, and he began to cry. So old a man, even his tears were few and useless, there were not enough of them to fall, only to rim his eyes and knit a silver veil to make them even more lost.

But he did get up. He pulled the cholla thorns from his hands, and he clucked to his mule, only to the one, the others would follow.

"Sugar, little Sugar, come, it is not so far. God cannot let it be too far, not now when there is so little time."

The sun blasted down on the Dragoons, on this old man in the deep hell of a canyon, and on another man—watching from the hill.

The second man was young, he had black hair and a thin, red slice of mouth with a pair of field glasses held in between. His hands were slim and veined with blue, his feet small but not shod for fashion, the toes were not too pointed, the heels not too high, these shoes could run if called upon.

And his guns could shoot. There were two of them, Colts, with their holsters tied low and fast, with that wonderful high polish on their butts as though they had been used and loved well. And his eyes could kill. There was that in their grey depths when he at last lowered the glasses, quiet, beady, hypnotizing eyes, snake eyes in a man's head, with a man's cunning behind them. Snake eyes watching that thin trickle of mules with their fat aparejos.

The old man staggered against his lead mule and locked his arms fast about the beast's neck, that way he could be half carried.

"I'm dying, Sugar, I'm so far dead I can't even climb to your back. If you could only know, if you could take the silver where it must go!" The words were thick, some of them not well begun, others cheated of their final syllables, they were mostly moaning sounds that might have been meaningless, if they hadn't held a man's heart.

He stumbled on, slower than ever before, his lips hung open and empty, his eyes looked and saw nothing. Not the glare in front of him or the man behind, yet only a speck climbing down the rocky sides of the gorge.

Mule bells tinkled and played a silvery tune, and one by one the bony fingers lost their grip, clawing at the dusty hair he fell into a little heap against the beast's foreleg, clinging to it desperately, as he was clinging to life. Though he knew it was useless. Soon the beast would tire and want to move on, and life would move on.

The watery eyes cleared, they saw the sky pierced by a strange, grey pinnacle, in certain lights and in certain fancies a man might make out horns with a laughing face beneath. He saw them now, this stone devil

laughing cynically over this little bit of hell.

"No!" It was a shriek that startled the mules and stopped the figure scurrying from rock to rock. There was a gun in his hand now and his lips were puckered in evil but though he listened, he heard no more.

The old man was babbling to himself, there was no strength left in him for shouts, only to whimper. "I can't die here, not here by the grey face, because this is where I made my first robbery, this is where I killed for the first time. It was a bullet in the back, just one, I did not know then there would be so many to follow. God in heaven, don't you see I cannot die here!"

His eyes were wild, his hands fumbling claws snatching a piece of soiled paper out of his pocket and a square pencil. "Look, God, I show you I mean to do right. I'll put it out plain, I, robber baron, Francis Amelia, wish to make right my life. I give all my treasure fifty thousand in pure Mexican silver dollars to the people of Chisley Town. I rob most from traders of Chisley Town and so I give it back to make right, and may God have mercy—"

A shadow stole across the ground, it came from behind over the top of his head, there was a peak to it, and a broad brim. The old man crumpled the paper in his hand and turned.

"I'm saved!" A gurgle of a laugh choked in his throat. "You will help me to Chisley? I must get to the town, I have something for it."

Fingers felt of one of the aparejos, they broke the fastenings and let the sun shine on the silver. It was pretty.

THE old man crawled once more to his feet, there was new strength in him and hope. "All that is mine, and the silver on the other mules. I give it to the people of Chisley Town. I want you should see they get it, all the men and all the women and all the children.

"Some of them will be the mothers and some of them will be the wives and some of them children of the traders I have met. This will help. I have figured it all out, this will keep me out of hell. Fifty thousand dollars to buy off the devil."

Still the stranger did not turn from the dove dollars, he was washing his hands in them, he could bury his arms clear up to the elbows in silver.

The old man touched him on the shoul-

der, "You must help me, it is the first good I have ever done, look, I have been a wicked man. Can you read it in my eyes?"

The young man turned impatiently as a person might who was bothered by a persistent fly. He was hard, his face like something beaten out of metal, and his clothes were dirty with great sweat rings, and his hands were light on his holstered gun. Grey eyes bored into blue.

The other leaned so close his breath was a foul rag between them, and the hope died in him and left a withered, empty shell. "You've got the evil there, too. My money is lost—and I am lost!"

And he was. He turned as though he might run, that was how he came to be shot in the back beneath the grey stone, laughing face.

The stranger waited while the smoke hazed out of his gun then he holstered it. "Give my regards to the devil. If he asks who cheated him out of fifty thousand dollars, tell him it was Erby."

The mules followed their new master as easily as they had followed the old. Their bells sang as merrily, they sang until they were memory, until the only sound left was the buzzing of flies around that darkening blob of red.

The sun blazed down on the Dragoons, as it had since the beginning of time. The pitted earth was the same, the thirsting vegetation, even the Indian riding his paint through the haze might have been born in the year one. His skin was pure golden red, without any white or black or any shame. His eyes were as proud, unbroken, unbent eyes, and he was as true to his gods as if there never had been a white man to know them by a different name.

There was the eagle feather in his hair, the sign of an Apache warrior, there was the ring of bear claws about his neck to show his totem, and a silver belt above blue breeches. There were a dozen bracelets on his arms, and his pony's head was decked in bright feathers and beads. They were both savages, standing on a rock promontory smelling death.

That was one of the things they said about Jamie Foxeye. Folks didn't know whether he smelt it, or saw it, or felt it—some even said he was a part of it, an Indian of long ago come back to ride the vengeance trail after white scalps.

Whatever the reason, death seemed to

hold a special meaning for him. Like now, in this silent peace. He watched a blow-fly leave a leaf and circle twice then dart east, he watched it and yet he scarcely saw it. He was listening to a faint buzzing, like a distant hive of bees.

There were tracks in the lower cut of the canyon, there were mule tracks and man tracks, two sets of man tracks, one following the other, and a scuffed place where something had fallen, and now he was sure, he could hear the flies quite plainly. Greedy, gorging little beasts singing a song of feasting.

The body had shrunken, it was even less of a shell than it had been before. Black eyes read the story of this hole in a man's back. It was a story so often written out here in this west, so often and so easily, where every shadow could hold a gun and every step be the last.

Surprise and greed and hate. This was greed. Because half buried in the sand were a couple of dobe dollars, and underneath the body a wadded ball of paper. "I robber baron, Francis Amelia—" As it had once before, a shadow fell across the twisted letters.

It was a lazy shadow that lingered and then came again and again as the great bird circled above. There was another bird coming from the west and one from the south. Strange. How quickly they knew—and knowing, they kept no secrets.

For miles around men seeing those birds would turn and stare and maybe shudder. And someone close might even bother to follow where they led. And someone had.

A rock fell in the stillness, it tumbled a dozen times, hollow, mocking sounds it made. Jamie Foxeye pressed back against the canyon wall, he pulled his pony into a blind crevice and then laid down on top of it to watch like a crouching panther.

There were no more falling rocks, no sounds at all, only the birds flying higher and higher until they were specks without eyes or scrawny necks or wings, even their shadows were lost, but they still marked the place. They still led the stranger here.

He walked slowly beside his pony, he was a beefy man with liquor-blushed cheeks and four chins hanging like garlands. There were great rolls of fat at his waist and wrists—and on his chest a ball-pointed star.

When he first saw the body the lawman made no move to go near it. He held his

gun ready and scanned the canyon walls, he searched every deepening shadow, even the spot where the Apache lay. But the sun was in his eyes, and the ground so broken, he looked away and at last stooped beside the dead.

THE yellow paper once more laid crumpled on the ground. Jamie Foxeye had left it there, all the pieces of the puzzle together, the hole in the back, the dove dollars, the note and the mule tracks going east.

"I, robber baron, Francis Amelia—" the fat hands began to shake, they shook until it was as though a plague had overtaken them. The lawman read the note twice, and then he held a match to the paper and watched it flame and smoke and pass into nothing at all.

Jamie Foxeye sneaked up behind him quiet as a bit of floating ash. He had his great bow in his hand with an arrow idle on its string, and that last step he took was a leap. He seemed almost to rise out of the ground before the lawman's eyes.

"Why did you do it?" His voice was low and soft as conscience. "Why did you burn the note?"

Fat lips smacked. "Get away, Redskin, before I kill you."

"No, my arrow is ready, your hands are empty." Jamie Foxeye stared at the dead man and then he looked at the living, at that bright, polished star, at the nervous twitching mouth, and lastly at the eyes, little eyes set far back in those folds of fat.

Jamie had seen the sheriff before and his eyes hadn't looked like this. Then they were dull and stupid and lazy. Now there were lights in them, cunning and hunger and something cold as death.

"Too much of the white man's money brings only evil. Don't do it. Don't do what is coming into your eyes."

"Don't do what?"

"Sell your neck for a few silver coins. That was why you burned the note wasn't it? So that only you and the man who murdered him would know about the fifty thousand dollars."

"You're fussy for an Indian, you're damn fussy. Out here a man takes what he can get."

"And he gets what he takes. Sometime, sooner or later, he pays." Jamie eased the bow that was rich and thick with carving.

"Maybe you are an honest man, more likely you are not, a sheriff has so many ways of making money. But don't let this be one of them.

"This money did not belong to one but to many men and many women and many children, some of them who are not yet done weeping for their dead. That is why I came to you, that is why I risked my life, not for him nor for you, but for all those people in Chisley Town.

"Take Francis Amelia with you and hang him in your square, that should be honor enough for you. He has been so wicked a man he only knew to rob and kill, small wonder he was afraid to die. Do you want to go his way? He had stolen much money—and it did him no good. There's a bounty on his head, that should be sufficient for you."

"Five hundred dollars!" It was a curse. "What is five hundred dollars against fifty thousand?"

"It's the price of honor and maybe even life, surely it is the price of sleep. The outlaw is like the Indian, hunted day and night. You do not know what it is to never sleep."

The sheriff sat like a brooding buddha, figuring it all out, that was why he answered the redskin's fool questions. He was testing, teasing himself to see just how perfect he could make it.

"And it wouldn't only be robbery, it would mean murder. See, you're thinking of it even now. You'll have to kill me and you'll have to kill the one who led the mules away. You must have silence, and it comes high. Your hands will be bathed in blood."

And it was his hands that had fooled Jamie Foxeye.

These great, fat hands that had held a tiny dueling pistol clasped between their palms. A flick of the wrist and the gun was pointed, a second more and the bullet had already bled its way home.

The sheriff of Chisley Town had figured it all out.

For a big man he had amazing agility and strength. He puffed and blew like a winded bull but one by one he hoisted the bodies and slung them over his pony's saddle. He smoothed the sand where the blood marks showed and then headed east, bright, hungering eyes on the mule tracks, and his hands working as though already counting those pretty silver dollars.

He had money on his mind, when he should have had murder. He should have been thinking about the tools of his trade, about guns and how hard it was to kill with a miniature dueling pistol. The bullets were so very small.

The mule tracks led out of the gorge and into the open country to the banks of a stream, a twisting, stagnate trickle of water, a winding way of sand bars and shallows and hidden pools. It was in one of these deep pools the lawman threw what was left of Francis Amelia and Jamie Fox-eye.

Sand shifted and swirled in a hundred eddys. There was moss and a slime that turned all the water a sour shade of green, and way down at the bottom where the shadows were deep as dusk lay the body of Francis Amelia. His pockets bulged with rocks and a huge boulder lay on his chest. Jamie Foxeye drifting down beside him had no pockets, and so there was a rope around his neck tied to a great rock, that anchored him to the bottom like a strange, sailless ship.

THE water washed the bullet wound, it brought good, red blood out of it and set up a stinging pain in the nerve that had been injured shocking the Indian into unconsciousness. Now he was shocked back. There was pounding in his ears, and his lungs were bursting.

He pulled on the rope and the rock wouldn't give, he couldn't even think. There was light up above, a ghostly glow where the sun was and the air, he had to have air, he couldn't think because he was frozen in terror, this terror of knowing he had to have air. And there was no air.

His hands were weaker when he tore at the rope again, if only he could rip it apart, if he could shred it with the bear claws on his necklace, or his teeth or a knife. He almost laughed, there with death's fingers tightening on his throat he almost laughed. Because there was a knife at his belt and he'd been so numb and frightened he'd forgotten it.

For a long time he floated in the water gulping air, it was like breathing in a furnace but it was air. It was wonderful. And when finally he was rested enough, and after the bleeding had stopped he walked back all the long way to the canyon.

His pony was still in the crevice, his

bow and arrow where they had fallen, and the trail, in spite of the lowering sun, as plain as the lines on his palm.

But by and by it turned and took to rock, the stars came out to light the way, and it was a slow, hard way to go with only a turned pebble here and a squashed bug there to guide him. And finally one small bright spot of fire.

It was in a cave and two men leaned over it, a fat man with a star on his chest, and a thin young man with death in his voice.

"No, you won't kill me. You won't kill me because you can't, you're too fat and too slow."

"You shot Francis Amelia."

"Who says I did?"

"The silver there on the backs of those mules."

The cruel eyes blinked. "How'd you know about the silver?"

"You were careless. There was a note."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Kill you."

Both men's guns were holstered, Erby's fists hung limp by his sides, the sheriff's clasped as though he were shaking hands with himself.

"I'm fast on the draw, sheriff, yet maybe you're faster. I wouldn't know. You've never been tested have you, we've never tried to fight it out with you, not with the so obliging Sheriff Thirsten. Only now you're not being so obliging. Let's get together on this, forget you ever saw me and I'll give you half."

"I don't want half. I want it all. I want fifty thousand dollars."

"You won't get it, you can't draw fast enough. That's what I'm watching, not your little pig of a face but your fingers."

"I'm not talking of my fingers, but others, you hadn't thought there might be a posse at my back."

For just a second the grey eyes wavered, they looked out into the night where the Indian lay like a dull, dead rock. "No. You didn't bring a posse, not here where there's so much treasure. I know you too well, Thirsten, your greedy, coward's heart. I've even loved you for it, all of us have, Amelia and myself and all the other gunmen in the county.

"You didn't have the courage to go out and kill on your own, but you told us when a rich convoy was passing through,

and we did the work and you led the posses away, for which kindness we gave you enough to keep you happy. But not this. Not fifty thousand dollars.

"I figured this out myself, I saw Amelia losing his nerve, it was because his heart was playing tricks on him and he was going blind. Do you know he didn't even recognize me until the last moment. He thought I was going to help him! And I'm not helping you, not an hombre who thinks half is too little and wants it all.

"Come on, Sheriff, make your play, we're wasting time and the devil's waiting. Reach for your guns, coward, and I'll send you straight to hell." He laughed his taunt and the sound echoed and reechoed and set a small avalanche of pebbles rolling as though the cave were laughing, too.

And slowly, ever so cautiously the sheriff's fingers parted. Jamie Foxeye who had stayed with the night and listened, Jamie Foxeye who had cause to remember a palmed dueling pistol, pulled back on his bowstring.

"Hoo-hoo-hoo-ah-hoo!" The Apache war cry shattered the laughter, it filled the cave with centuries of terror. Of torture, and dancing red devils, and the final mercy of death.

More than a hundred pounds pressure the great bow had, and a wonderful high, sweet song when the arrow left it, a short song with the second arrow taking its place with the first, and they both beat the bullets. Surprise held men numb and stupid, held them until the arrows ploughed into their chests.

It was nice shooting, deep and clean and high, above the heart and above the lungs, they would live, unless they died of fright. For the moment both were unconscious.

Jamie Foxeye tied each man to his own horse and he gathered up the guns and ammunition and dynamite stored in the robber's cave, and he tied all the horses and mules together so that he would not lose one in the dark. After that he headed for Chisley Town, back the way he had come, out of the rocks and into the sand, to the deep pool where Francis Amelia waited.

The moon came out and spun a silvery web across the sky for a little while until clouds blackened the earth in shadows and made it little better than a black hole filled with sound, mule bells and mule feet, and a man's curses.

Erby was the first to become conscious, he swore to all the devils in the world that the sheriff would pay for this. In the dark he couldn't see the sheriff was tied and riding head down, too, and Jamie Foxeye didn't bother to tell him so. And then when the sheriff could speak, he, too, swore and begged and cursed, and it was no use. No use at all.

THE sky was grey with dawn when the cavalcade reached Chisley Town. A light or two shone in the scattered houses and somewhere there was the sharp ring of a milk pail against wood. The jail was in the very center of town, a fine new building of brick; beside it, squatting like a fat, grey mushroom was the sheriff's office.

Erby wasn't cursing anymore. His eyes were balled in terror, his face raining sweat. He was known in Chisley Town, known and hated and feared almost as much as Amelia, there were a hundred men who would shoot him on sight. God! How had he let this happen to him!

He looked at the Indian riding high and proud above, and he looked at the sheriff, his face a mottled purple, his mouth stuffed round with a gag, his fat hands working ceaselessly at their bonds. Erby watched them enviously, if those were his hands—fat was so easily slipped through bonds, it was so pliable.

But his wrists were bone. He tried moving them again, there was no use. Grey eyes closed in agony, this was a nightmare, it had to be. Not after all these years, it couldn't be true, riding into town like a trussed pig.

Jamie Foxeye rifled the sheriff's pockets for his keys and then he opened the door with them. He led the mules right inside, the mules with the men and the mules with the silver. And once he got them safely locked he would make the sheriff write a confession.

He would have to have everything done before he called the people, they would not believe an Indian, they would not believe a robber, they would only believe of the sheriff what he said himself. That would fix everything plain and easy and without any loopholes. And the people of Chisley Town would know what kind of a man it was they had trusted, it would be there in his own writing.

"I told them where to go and rob. I told

them whom to kill. I shared their money, that was your money." That was the way he would have him write it.

It was just as Jamie Foxeye turned to close and bolt the door that the sheriff pulled free. Only his hands, still there might have been a chance, but there was a knife on his desk lying there where he'd left it beneath a pile of papers, right where he could reach it.

He slashed his ankle bonds first and then tore the gag out of his mouth, tore it out and ran screaming through the back door because the Indian had whirled and was reaching for his great bow.

Sheriff Thirsten was a cock crowing over Chisley Town that early morn. "Erby is in my office! I've cornered the robber Erby in my office! I've got him alive and Francis Amelia dead. And there's an Apache accomplice, we can shed red blood as well as white. Bring rope, gents, and string it on the tree. I've brought you Erby on a platter!"

And Erby was screaming inside as the crowd gathered like boiling black clouds in front and behind. "He's got me but I've got him! Ask him about how he brought me here! Ask him about the folks he's helped me rob. He's building you a fine jail but he's never had any killers in his old jail and he won't in the new! Ask him why, let him tell you it's because he gave us our protection."

But they didn't believe. Of course they didn't, cornered rats would bite in any direction they could, no matter how useless. The sheriff had brought them Erby, that was answer enough. They carried their rope and they strung it on the tree, two easy swinging nooses, waiting for business. It would come, it would only be a matter of time. There could be no escape.

And Jamie Foxeye saw that, too. Standing inside out of range of the window he could tell there was no hope. If he had a thousand arrows, or ten thousand, if he had five times the number of guns and ten times the amount of dynamite he had taken from the cave, still there would be no escape.

Erby was begging, he was cursing, he was groveling, he was doing everything under heaven that he knew to make the Indian set him free. "You got guns. Hell, let me have them and I'll shoot a path for both of us right straight through that crowd."

"There aren't enough guns in the world to do that. Not in the hands of one man."

"That can't be true. I've shot my way out of tight places before."

"This isn't a tight place, it's the end. Listen to the roaring."

Voices came through the walls, men's shouts and women, too, the West was turning, this little part of the West that had been terrorized so long was tasting the sweets of revenge. There were shouts for a battering ram and shouts for fire, and Jamie Foxeye slipped the knife out of his belt and began to cut the bonds on Erby's feet.

Bullets whined through the room, they were a rain of death turned the walls into sieves. But they went hungry, they found no man and no beast because of that new, brick jail. Part of the old office was in the new jail, it made a little brick alcove on three sides and with the sheriff's high, old desk pulled up in front it was an almost safe place for man and beast to crouch in and gain a few more minutes of life. There wouldn't be too many, not after the fire came.

JAMIE FOXEYE turned to the frightened mules and to his own pony most of all, he stroked their necks and thought about the fire. It was too bad. And the people out there were too bad, too. Women and children and men learning the taste of blood, patting one man on the back and cursing the other. All because they didn't know.

Because a sheriff meant something good and a robber meant something bad. They couldn't see they both were rotten at the core. So one would live, and that wasn't fair. He would go on living and cheating and killing by proxy, and they would never know.

They would go to the sheriff for protection when they shipped their goods, as they had in the past, and those who were left would ride in the posses afterwards, and none of them would ever know. It would be too bad.

Erby lay on the floor and rubbed his ankles against each other, he couldn't massage them properly because his hands were still tied and Jamie Foxeye wasn't bothering with them now. He had stood there like a statue staring at the silver and then he seemed to go quite mad.

There were a dozen streams of blood on

his arms and shoulders where he had been nicked with bullets, but still he cut the leather aparejos off the mules and crawling on his belly he dragged them to the middle of the room.

He made a pile of the costly stuff that was worth far more than fifty thousand dollars. Men had died for it, one man yesterday and two were to die today, and there was no way knowing how many before. Yes, fifty thousand was the cheapest part of its price.

There were shouts outside of fire and the crowd parted, just the tips of their heads could be seen through the high, shattered glass, the tips of their heads and this great burning brand. And the sheriff screaming.

"Set it afire, boys, there's no sense storming the place, they have guns, there's no sense any of us dying for such scum as them. Set it afire and keep your guns ready and wait till they run like rats out of a hole!"

Jamie Foxeye cut the bonds on Erby's hands. "You'll know what to do when the time comes." And then he lighted the fuse on the dynamite, all the dynamite he had found in the cave, laid in a little heap under the dove dollars.

It was a very short fuse. The building seemed to belch, the walls went out and the roof, all out and then fell back in, because they were so old perhaps, because they were so riddled with holes. The two men behind the desk were not hurt, even the beasts would live, and the men outside trampling over each other to pick up money.

It was falling on them out of the sky, fifty thousand dollars dropping on the ground, and pushed through windows, and into walls, like a bright, incredible stucco. For half a mile around there was money, studding the tie rails, studding the sidewalks, money in chimneys, and money in people's hair. Fifty thousand dollars to buy off the devil. And all the men and all the women and all the children of Chisley

Town stopped to gather up their share. All but three.

Erby had known what to do with his hands once they were free. He had them around the sheriff's screaming throat. Erby cursed in his ears. "So I'm scum, am I? So you're an honest lawman, and I'm scum with a rope around my neck. You helped weave that rope, Thirsten, weave it and knot it and now you're going to sit back and take all the glory and your share of the money.

"But it won't be enough! Don't you remember, not even a half was enough for you, you wanted it all. Well, you can have it, I want you to have it, I'll give you every hellish piece of it!"

He grabbed a handful off the ground and stuffed it between the fat lips. That was what sheriff Thirsten died of. He choked on a mouthful of money.

But not before he'd shot Erby through the heart. And Jamie Foxeye, watching from the ruins, smiled. This was the way it always was if you gave them a chance. Dog eat dog.

He leaped onto his red saddle blanket and turned his pony and at the very last house he stopped and picked a dollar out of the wall. He was very proud as he turned the coin over and over in his hands. He would wear it at his belt like a bloody scalp lock won in battle. Because in a way, it was the white man's scalp lock. He must remember that.

There weren't enough bullets to carry him through that mob, there wasn't enough dynamite. Blood wouldn't have stopped them, or death, or fire. But money did. He would have to remember that. Money could kill and money could save, so it was not all evil, it was just a matter of using it to best advantage.

He thought of Sheriff Thirsten and his bulging mouth; he looked to the people who had gathered peace along with their aprons of wealth. And he tucked the silver dollar in his belt and rode on west.

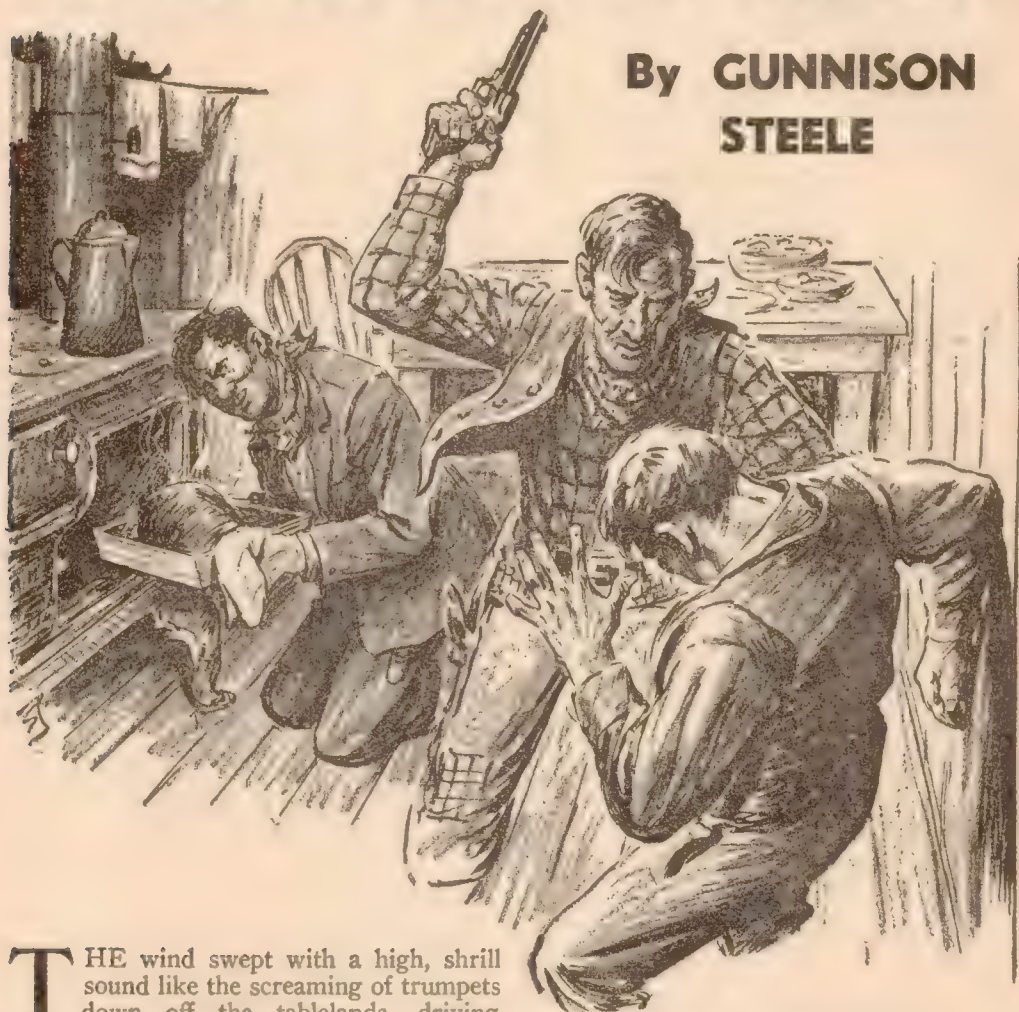
BLOODY ISLAND

The small island out in the Mississippi opposite St. Louis was the field of honor on which many of the gentlemen of the town named for King Louis IX settled their differences. So many duels were fought there in those pioneer days of St. Louis that it soon became known as Bloody Island.

—JWQ

GUN-WOLVES' MEAT

By GUNNISON
STEELE



THE wind swept with a high, shrill sound like the screaming of trumpets down off the tablelands, driving sleety snow through the wintry twilight and shouldering roughly against Johnny Kabe's cabin there beside Steelhead Creek. Blocky, redhaired Johnny, preparing a meal inside the warm cabin, shivered with snug comfort.

The wind's rushing sound was so constant and violent that at first Johnny wasn't sure he'd heard a knocking on the door. Then the knocking came again, and Johnny

Verne hit him a wicked, solid blow. . . .

Kabe, with a last quick peek into the stove's steaming oven, went to the door and opened it. Two men stood there, bulking darkly in the snow-shrouded twilight.

Shielding his eyes from the wind-whipped snow, Johnny said, "Heck of a night to be out, gents. Come on in—"

But the two men had already shouldered

*Young Johnny's wild past caught up with him in a snow-bound cabin—
where two tough owlhooters begged for Death.*

past him and were in the lamp-lighted room. They were swathed in sheepskin coats, with bandannas tied over their hats and under their chins to protect their faces and ears from the freezing wind and sleet.

Johnny forced the door to and turned to face them. And suddenly he got very still and the friendly grin left his freckled face. He felt cold and still inside.

One of the men was squat, dark-faced, with wicked little eyes. The other was gaunt, buck-toothed, with a scar writhing across one cheek. Johnny Kabe had seen them before, and he had hoped he would never see them again.

The blocky hombre's name was Blackie Shannon, the lanky one's Sam Verne. They were outlaws.

"What're you two skunks doin' here?" Johnny asked flatly.

"Why, we're just on a friendly little visit, kid," Blackie said, grinning. "We knowed we'd be welcome, so we've already put our broncs in the barn and grained 'em."

"You ain't welcome. And you two promised, last time you was here, that it'd be the last time you bothered me."

"We don't aim to pester you," Verne protested. "We never have, have we? We was just passin' by, and was cold and hungry, so we thought we'd stop a minute. 'Course if you don't want us—"

Johnny crossed to the stove and lifted off a stew pan of potatoes. Biscuits, coffee and gravy were already smoking on the tiny table. He was silent as Blackie and Sam Verne took off their coats, revealing low-slung guns.

He wasn't fooled by their show of friendliness. They were watching him warily, as they always had before, never quite certain of his servility. And they hadn't just "stopped by"; they wanted something, likely shelter until the blizzard blew itself out which might be several days.

Several years ago, when he was still a kid, he had known these two down in Arizona. He'd never blamed them for his wildness, but he *had* blamed them for getting him drunk and baiting him into helping them rob a bank. To make it worse, Blackie had shot down the cashier.

Later, when he'd sobered up, the full impact of what he'd done had hit Johnny Kabe like a sledge hammer. He'd held a gun on Blackie and Verne, took the money, and managed to return it to the bank without re-

vealing who he was or how he had come by the money. Then he'd ridden far and fast.

He'd settled here in Montana, started him a little outfit. Four years had passed—four years of honest living and hard work, with the liking and respect of his neighbors—before Blackie Shannon and Sam Verne found him, quite by accident. They hadn't tried to kill him for what he'd done, but they'd made it pretty tough on him.

On three different occasions he had been forced to furnish them shelter and sanctuary, furnish them fresh mounts, when they were running from the law. They'd sworn that, unless he did what they said, they would see that the sheriff found out about his one foray against the law down in Arizona.

Johnny knew they weren't bluffing. He knew that, despite the fact that he had returned the bank money, he would draw at least a big prison sentence if the truth became known. And since at about that time a certain slender, dark-eyed girl named Rose had started figuring prominently in his plans for the future, he dreaded for that to happen.

He knew further that, once his usefulness to them had ended or they suspected he meant to balk, they would murder him in cold blood. They were wolf-mean and treacherous, and they hated him for what he'd done that time in Arizona.

"YOU had any visitors lately, kid?" Blackie asked.

"Old Shanty Cannon stopped by yesterday," Johnny said stiffly. "He's my nearest neighbor, three miles to the south. You two worried about somebody seein' you?"

"That's our business," Verne said coldly. "You just do like you're told and you'll be all right."

Blackie was sniffing appreciatively at the savory food odors. He crossed to the stove, opened the oven and peeped inside, sniffed again.

"Thought I smelled meat roastin'," he grinned. "Danged if it ain't roast 'possum, too. Ain't nothin' I like better'n 'possum that's been stewed in its grease. Looks to me like it's about done, too."

"Let that meat alone," Johnny grunted. "It's for old Shanty Cannon."

"Shanty Cannon'll play hell gettin' it! We ain't et since mornin', and we need it worse'n that old goat."

"But I promised him—"

"I don't care what you promised him!" Blackie said wickedly. "Kid, you start kickin' over the traces and I'll salivate you. You ain't forgettin' somethin', are you?"

"The time you two snakes got me drunk and talked me into helpin' you rob a bank, you mean? No, I ain't forgettin'."

"You'd better not. We know how you're fixed here. A sweet little outfit, and folks think you're ace-high. And there's a girl named Rose Tully you aim to marry, ain't there?"

"So what? Keep your slimy tongue off her or—"

"Or what?" Sam Verne purred. "Look, kid—get proddy with us and you ain't the only one somethin' might happen to. Yeah, I'm talkin' about the girl. Get this straight: We've got you hogtied and we aim to keep you that way. Long as you live you'll do just what we say—or go to the pen, maybe hang!"

Johnny Kabe's face was white, his eyes furious.

"So you lied when you promised not to bother me anymore! You aim to hold me just like a fly on the end of a pin. If I ever get married, have a family, you'll still come here, devil my wife and kids—"

"That's right. But we've talked enough. Blackie, bring out that roast 'possum and we'll see how it goes with them potatoes and gravy."

"You better leave that meat alone," Johnny said hotly. "I told you it belongs to Shanty Cannon. Eat the other stuff if you want it, and get out, but that meat—"

"Blast you, didn't I say shut up!" Verne snarled.

He drew his gun suddenly, swiped the barrel viciously at Johnny Kabe's head. Johnny twisted aside, but the gun caught him a glancing blow over one ear. He staggered, shaking his head, put one hand against the wall to steady himself and fight off dizziness.

"Don't bother that meat," he warned. "It ain't—"

Verne hit him again then, a wicked, solid blow that drove the blocky young rancher to the floor. He twitched a time or two, then lay still.

"Damn it, Verne, you've killed him!" Blackie said.

"He ain't dead," Verne denied coldly.

"Just knocked out. He'll live to do a lot of dirty work for us yet. Well, what you waitin' on? Bring out that roast 'possum!"

* * *

The wind had slackened somewhat, but snow still fell and it was bitterly cold, when Johnny Kabe drove his buckboard into the town of Staghorn the next morning. In the back of the buckboard were two stiff, blanket-covered figures.

Rawboned, gray-mustached old Sheriff Bill Tantor came out, lifted a corner of the blanket to peer underneath, grunted and let it drop again. A couple of minutes later the stiff figures were stretched on the floor of the sheriff's office.

"Why, that's Blackie Shannon and Sam Verne," Sheriff Tantor declared in some surprise. "Bad hombres, wanted for half a dozen killin's, with sizeable rewards on their scalps. Robbed a stage and killed the driver three days ago down close to Redwater. Kind of been watchin' for them myself. What happened?"

"They showed up at my place early last night," Johnny Kabe explained, looking the sheriff in the eye. "I knew right off they were bad ones on the run. They wanted me to put 'em up until the storm blew itself out. They seemed powerful hungry. I had some meat cookin' in the stove, and I reckon they ate it."

"You reckon? Didn't you see 'em eat it?"

"No, I didn't. I told 'em to let that meat alone, that it was for old Shanty Cannon. I told 'em two or three times. Then the tall gent got mad and hit me over the head with a gun. Knocked me out, and when I woke up most of the meat had been eaten."

"What kind of meat was it?"

"Well, they thought it was roast 'possum, but it wasn't. It was skunk."

"Dang it, what if it was?" yelled the old sheriff. "I've et roast skunk, and it's better than 'possum any day!"

"That's a fact. But there's a lot of difference in skunks, and they knocked me cold before I could tell 'em about this particular one. You see, old Shanty's rheumatism has been botherin' him somethin' fierce lately, and I'd promised to take him some skunk oil to cure it up. But happens the only way I could catch that fool skunk was with poison. It was full as a sheep-tick with strychnine!"

THAT'S MY POP!

By JOHN WALTON

BILLY ANDERSON was going West. The rumbling stagecoach that covered the desert mounds between Silver City and Phoenix was the last leg of his journey and he bounced exuberantly on the springless seat as the sandy hills rolled by.

The other passengers scarcely shared his enthusiasm for the trip. Jammed in like so many prepaid parcels, choked by the billowing dust and baked by the sun on the carriage roof, they threw annoyed glances in the direction of their unsubdued fellow traveler and crowded away as far as possible from his eagerly squirming body.

Billy was accustomed to dirty looks, however, and he was coldly indifferent to public opinion. Since his father had left him homeless at the age of twelve and headed West to make his fortune, Billy had shifted for himself on the streets of Boston's waterfront slums. At seventeen he was budding into a confirmed hard-case.

He had proved too much for Boston. With the easy imitation of childhood, he had become adept at sneak-thievery and pocket-picking. In those un-enlightened times, there was little time devoted to "correction." He was fully prepared, when apprehended with his hand in a lady's purse, to take his medicine. But his freckled face and his sturdy grin were irresistibly winning.

For five years, Boston police and church charitable institutions put up with Billy's anti-social behavior, always hoping for a reform that never came. But when he tossed a brick through a merchant's window and made off with \$150 worth of jewelry, justice could no longer be ignored.

"Billy," said the kindly minister of Boston's Church of the Redeemer, "isn't there anything else you really want to do?"

"Yes," he answered promptly. "Go out West and find my father." This proposition seemed to offer a way to keep the endearing young scamp from jail.

So in 1883 Billy was turned loose on the innocent pioneers of the Great West. Working his way across nearly 4000 miles of unsettled country would have been diffi-

cult; stealing his way across was easy.

As the stage rocked along past a desolate stretch of hills, Billy thrust his hand into the pocket of his tattered jacket and fingered the take. From the four women in the stagecoach he had only been able to garner two pins and three fob watches. But the men! Billy had never lifted a watch chain heavier than the one he had just taken from the Wells, Fargo guard beside him, and it was dangled with jeweled charms and gold nuggets. The men had all had money, too.

In the midst of his gloating reverie, he was interrupted by a volley of shots. He heard shouts—and the coach ground to a stop.

The bandits, led by a masked, sandy-haired giant, began their hunt for treasure. But they were no more surprised than the passengers when not a single gem, watch or dollar bill was brought to light. And no wonder—the victims had been cleaned out several miles back.

Billy watched scornfully. This form of robbery, where the theft was at least open and above board, did not yet appeal to him. He was the last to be searched. Roughly, the bandit chief grabbed him and shook him upside down. As the valuables tumbled out of his pockets Billy let loose a stream of abuse.

"If you were my kid, I'd wham you, you little thief!" the bandit roared. At the same time that the wind raised his mask, his booming voice struck a long-silent chord in the youngster's heart.

"Pop!" Billy shrieked in great joy. "Pop, don't you know me?"

Electrified, Bandit Bart Anderson turned the freckled boy right side up and stared at him. Slowly, conviction dawned in his face.

This happy reunion of father and son, witnessed by the eight occupants of the stage, was the beginning of a long association. Together, Bart and Bill Anderson terrorized the Arizona-New Mexico border for fifteen years. And, as was proper and fitting, in 1897, when they were wounded while getting away from a bank robbery, the devoted two died together—at the end of the same rope.

★ ★ KILL THAT



To get his wagons rolling, Jerkline had to fight a tricky army colonel, a renegade killer—and a lovely, ice-blooded blonde.

Gripping

Pioneer



Novelette

JERKLINE CREW!



They were rolling—come hell or highwater!

By DEL
RAYBURN

CHAPTER *Bushwack Firewater*

1 A rude toe, punishing his ribs, roused Jerkline Jerghosend from his dreamless sleep. He rolled, groaning, to get away from the insistent boot; for the moment his only sensation was distress.

Then full consciousness dribbled back into his deflated senses, bringing him suddenly alive and upright. He caught his roaring head between his calloused hands. For a moment he sat thus, pressing it hard in a vain effort to silence the punishing thunder throbbing within it.

At last, looking up, he caught sight of Colonel Drumm, the Fort Benton C.O. "How the hell— What time is it, anyhow?" Jerkline gasped.

One quick glance around was enough to identify his surroundings as the weed-and-trash littered lot behind the Great Western Saloon.

"You drunken bum!" the Colonel roared in a tone that made Jerkline briefly thankful that he was a civilian and not a soldier. "Fat chance Fort Walla Walla has of ever receiving those supplies if they depend on a trifling skinner like you to get them through. I'm going to recommend that your contract be canceled and renegotiated with Great Western Freighters, even if you did underbid them!"

"Hold on there, Colonel!" Jerkline came to his feet, all six feet four inches of him. His blazing grey eyes by now were again normal and equal to the most ferocious growling Drumm could muster. "I never been drunk in my life! That ain't the half of it!"

Jerkline went on angrily:

"I just made a big mistake in trying to be sociable with a man drawing Great Western pay. I had one drink with him and that's the last I remember. So now I know they're all rats! And you ner no other brass monkey's going to turn my contract to them. I'll roll that freight into Walla Walla before them Great Western ox lovers could top the Continental!"

"Doped drink!" the Colonel snorted. "Nothing I hate worse than a man who won't acknowledge to facts, always tries to alibi."

"Who got you outa your pretty pink blankets this early in the morning anyhow?" Jerkline growled with menacing significance. "Who told yuh to look back here for me, I'm wondering. If you wasn't a doddering, near-sighted, addle-brained old fool with Uncle Sam's eagles holding up your shoulders I'd— Maybe Uncle Sam'd like to know some answers about you and your friends too," the teamster declared as a new angle struck him.

"And if things is like I think," he went on, "I don't know what Uncle Sam ud do, but you can look up that peace talking, friendship wanting Great Western corral boss, Dunc McGill, after I finish with him and see what I'll do if I ever catch you without that uniform to hold you together, you tea-party General you!" Jerkline's headache was forgotten. "I got me no doll-faced lap-cat to ladle out tea and wafers to you, nor no easy chairs for you to drape your fat over, like Muh Lord, your high talking friend Grant Meriwell has with his grafting Great Western Freighters lining his pockets. But, Mister, don't never think I can't keep what I have got, and that's a contract that'll put me right up on top the heap Meriwell's soon vacating."

His hard forefinger stabbed down at the jutting chest of the poker-stiff Colonel, rocking him back on his heels. And before the officer could reassemble his shattered dignity and quiet his outraged sputtering into intelligent speech, Jerkline pushed past him, disappearing in the alleyway between the saloon and the neighboring building, headed for the street beyond.

"Mule skinner!" the deep-throated Jerkline boomed as he emerged upon the street, his voice rolling over the early morning quiet like a trumpet. "Roll 'em out! Roll 'em out! Hook up and roll 'em out."

As if in answer there was the clatter of hoofs down the street. And then a rider reined up hard before him, raising a swirling cloud of dust around them. He found himself looking into cold, angry eyes as hard as his own. Bell O'Daie was sitting the saddle before him.

"Well, so it was just a joke, your talk of a mule-skinning outfit I could invest my money in and drive Meriwell out of his own game!" the calculating, beautiful but icy eyed lady gambler suggested. "All you really wanted money for was so you and your mule skinning friends could go on a tear! Well the least you could have done was to have come to my saloon to spend it. You dirty, booze-loving—"

"Wait a minute, Bell!" Jerkline's forearm whipped up. But too late to fend off her slashing quirt. It caught him along the temple and left twin trails of blood from there to the point of his chin, causing him to suck in his wind with pain. But that was his only evidence of hurt.

"I know it would kill your cold innerds

to lose one red cent of money," he murmured as his breath wheezed back out hoarsely. "But you needn't worry about what you've got in my outfit. I'll pay off, sister. And with interest. And you'll have all your precious money before anyone else gets a cent. Then we'll see how far you get cutting me across the face, you hellcat! You know I don't get drunk. Where's the boys?"

"**M**AYBE they don't get drunk either," Bell's voice was just as icy. "But they're all at the corral, down in the dirt with their heads under'm. Foundered fools! A fine send-off, this, for your new fast-mule-freight outfit that's going to make Great Western's ox-lovers look sick. Rolling out the first time this morning, and the whole outfit bright as new dollars. They'll be armed with bows and arrows over at Walla Walla before you ever get guns and ammunition to them, at this rate."

"So the Great Western loving Colonel has already informed me," Jerkline grinned menacingly over his heavy shoulder as he pushed past her mount into the street, starting toward the corrals. "You get back to your Square Deal Saloon and a layout you understand. I'll do the freighting. The profits on this trip will pay you off and then you won't have to worry about the odds of bucking Grant Meriwell outright. You can figure out some more underhanded lady-like way of making him sorry he picked that doll-faced pet for his lap-cat instead of you!"

"Oh darn you, you hard-headed Swede," the blonde-haired Bell exclaimed with some display of emotion other than ice, for the first time. She reined and spurred after him. "This is just what Meriwell wanted, to get us fighting among ourselves. I've never told a living man I was sorry for anything, never. But I'll say it, Jerkline. I'm sorry. We can't let Meriwell make us play our hand the way he wants it played. We're still partners. Will you shake on it?"

"You better think it over a little longer and be sure you know what you mean by partners. You try getting overbearing and using the whip on me again, sister, and I'll show you how I handle spoiled brats."

"I've never put anything over on a man and used my skirts to hide behind," Bell declared. "Not since ten years ago when a bushwhacked downed my Daddy and the

Square Deal was all he had to leave me. I had to make the place pay off or go to scrubbing floors or washing dishes, but I've never made any man give me breaks by swishing my skirts. If you think I've got something coming—"

She broke off with a startled gasp as Jerkline wheeled with no warning, snatched her from the saddle, and bounced her down across his knee. She strangled down the first cry of pain that almost escaped her throat in her first moment of incredulous surprise, as Jerkline's hard palm began dusting the seat of her riding breeches vigorously.

But a moment later when he set her upright on her own feet there were tears on her cheeks and her eyes had lost their icy glint for the first time he remembered in the two years he'd known her.

Bell did not try to remount, but led her horse and limped along beside him, her bronze-blond head bobbing along below his broad shoulder, as the young skinner headed on toward the corrals.

Two of the teamsters were at the water trough trying to ease their fire-tortured brains, when Jerkline and Bell reached the corrals, which were the headquarters of their newly formed Fast Overland Freight Company. The others sprawled unconscious around a burned-out campfire.

"What happened to you fellers?" the skinner boss demanded of the conscious pair. "Who staked you boys to the barrel of booze?"

"Boss," one skinner groaned in an Arkansas accent, "I'll swear, I thought I was a drinking man. But last night after supper we was sitting around shooting the breeze before turning in and along come the friendliest boy I ever seen."

"He had a ge-tar, and a jug and he set in, after asking polite like if no one had objections, and begun making sweet music. And then he passed his jug and tole us to help ourselves. And, boss, I'll swear, one drink was all I had. But I musta passed out like a little chile. And oh my! This head I woke up with. It's awful!"

Jerkline walked on to the unconscious circle. There he stooped, jerked back up and caught his own head in his hands for a moment. The next time he was more careful as he reached down and caught two men by the heels, one in either hand.

He swung them high and brought them

down head first in the big tank of water with the chill of night still upon it. He repeated the process several times, each time with a new pair of patients. And a few minutes later his whole crew of skinners were well on their way to partial recovery.

"Maybe none of us will be so trusting the next time someone offers us a free drink," he rumbled as men all around him sputtered water or cursed aching heads. "The only ge-tar-playing boy I know of in these parts is Mister Grant Meriwell's cook."

"I'm for going after that son, then, and stringing him from the highest tree on the Missouri!" a teamster growled.

"He was just carrying out orders," Jerkline pointed out. "It's his boss we want to get at. The best way to do that is to get our wagons rolling. Get your donks harnessed. Let's get 'em hooked up and roll!"

He waited until the teamsters and their helpers had scattered to the various corrals where their sixteen-head teams of big mules were feeding. Then he turned back into the street and headed toward the main part of town.

"Where are you off to now?" Bell asked as he passed her.

"I'm going to see Duncan McGill about that friendly little drink we had last night," Jerkline growled.

CHAPTER

Buck a Pat Hand

2

Tough-hided oxen were feeding peacefully and there was no sign of activity at the Great Western Freighters' corrals when Jerkline reached them. His nose wrinkled with distaste as he walked along outside the corrals of big work cattle.

He was reflecting, with wonderment, why a man would choose to work with such stupid, awkward looking brutes when he might just as well have the companionship of good mules. But that was forgotten as a voice hailed him:

"Hey you! What do you want snooping around here?"

He wheeled to find approaching a person he first took to be a teen-age boy. And then as he peered closer he was surprised to recognize Mae McGill, her raven-black hair

hidden inside an old felt hat and the feminine contour of her shapely body lost in a loose, checkered man's shirt and waist overalls. He had seen very little of the girl in all the time he had been in and out of Fort Benton, and in times past had wished he could see more of her. But that was forgotten now, as he growled:

"I'm looking for that old man of yours, sis. I'm not snooping around nowhere. I do my doing right out in the open in broad daylight. Where is he?"

"You're a great one to come looking for my father after what you did to him last night," Mae blazed, her violet eyes blazing pools of blue fire. "How much do you think a man can stand, you monkey-brained ape? Even a Scotsman isn't equal to the punishment a white-maned gorilla like you can hand out. Get out of here before I kill you," one small hand suddenly appeared from the waistband of her pants with a gun in it, "kill you like the mad dog you are!"

"You talk like you'd been touched in the head," Jerkline declared. "I never laid hands on your old man up to this very minute. But I don't aim to be able to say that from today on, not after that poisoned whiskey he had fed to me last night."

"You big dope, do you think you can fool me with that kind of talk? Father, even if he'd known you were going to try to kill him with those big ape paws of yours, he'd never have stooped to dopping a man's drink. But if someone did, I'm glad. Maybe that's all that kept you from killing him, like you started out to do."

"I got no intention of killing him, sis. That'd be too good for him. I'm just going to bruise him up until he'll think a long time before he asks another man to have a friendly drink and then slips dope into it. And I ain't thinking no more of him as a man, sending a little girl like you out to front for him after pulling such a lowdown trick."

"Front for him! Why you stupid—" Mae broke off with exasperation. "Father's at home in bed right now from the beating you gave him last night. He may even die. And you—"

"Sis, I've never called a lady a liar, but I'm telling you straight, I never touched a hair of your old man's head last night or no other time. Up to this morning, when I woke up, down with my head under me

out in the weeds behind your outfit's saloon. I thought Duncan McGill was straight and my friend. As straight and as much my friend as a man could be and keep working for Great Western.

"But I know better now. He took me in there last evening as I was headed for Bell's place for supper. Wanted to have a friendly drink. We had the drink and talked a minute and that's the last I remember."

"Lies!" the girl snapped, but her tone did not have the same full ring of conviction it had once had. "Trying to cover up your brutality with lies! If I was only a man I'd shoot you like I would a snake."

"Put that pop gun up before it goes off," Jerkline warned. He turned his back on her and started to stride away. "I'll go to your house and see if your tale is straight about your old man being beat up and in bed."

BUT something suddenly lashed in between his legs, tangling his stride, tripping him. He went down in an easy, rolling fall that would have snapped him right on up as he hit the ground and back to his feet. But something snarled out, sending a rush of hot air past his cheek that stopped his upward bounce cold as a report like a gunshot sounded so close to his ear that it left his head ringing.

His startled eyes came upon Mae McGill. And a long bullwhip writhed like a living thing in one of her small brown hands. Whether she had snatched it from somewhere on the corral fence, or where it had come from, he did not know. But she had it. And she seemed to know how to use it.

"I might of known I couldn't use that danged gun on you," the girl breathed heavily, "but I could sure take pleasure in cutting you into strips with this whip. I'm not a master bullwhacker's daughter for nothing, Mister. Don't think I can't do it!"

"Why dang your high-headed little hide," Jerkline exclaimed in a rising roar. "This is the second time in one morning a female has tried using a whip on me, just like I was one of them slow-witted bulls in the corral there. And I'm getting plumb fed up—"

He snapped to his feet, coming up fast, and saw the angry whip lash smoking out to meet him, coming straight for his eyes. He batted it down with one thick forearm, wincing but ignoring the pain as it lashed

around his wrist. He swiftly closed in.

The girl tried to jerk her whip free, a frantic yell tearing from her throat as she stumbled back, trying to keep clear of him. But Jerkline's hand closed upon her arm and he tore the handle of the whip from her.

Shaking the lash free of his bloody wrist, he hurled the bullwhip out over the corrals as far as he could. And for a moment they stood thus, glaring and winded.

"I got a good notion to—"

"I've got a better one," a new voice cut Jerkline off as he contemplated giving Mae some of the same medicine he had handed out to Bell earlier. "Get your hands up, Jerghosend! This is the law speaking. Most shameful thing I ever seen, a man your size attacking a little girl like her."

Jerkline wheeled. He recognized Fatty Gordon's pussy-gutted bulk bulging on either side of a heavy corral corner post around which he was poking a gun in the skinner's direction.

"Well, if it isn't Grant Meriwell's fearless star-toting Marshal," the young freighter declared. "I wouldn't be surprised but that Meriwell had it all figured out just when you was to show up here. Probably had this all staged!"

He wheeled back to eye Mae. "And you so outraged about your pappy. And so now according to the plan the marshal herds me off to jail and you can go tell your coyoting old man it's safe to come out of his hole. Is that it?"

Mae slapped him, her hard palmed hand raising a reddening welt along his jaw. But Jerkline did not flinch or bat an eye. A contemptuous smile spread across his wind-burned lips. Suddenly she turned and ran.

"You going to come with me peaceably, Jerghosend?" Fatty demanded uncertainly, still keeping to the protection of the corner post, wagging his gun as if seeking to draw the giant young skinner's attention to its menace.

"I'm going to saddle and ride, Gordon," Jerkline declared. "I'm going to get my men and mules out of this place before skunk stink of you and the rest of your kind that lick Meriwell's boots gets too strong for us. And I don't think you'd better try taking a shot at my back, Fatty, unless it's a good one. Because I'll blast you loose from that post that's holding you up now, if you don't kill me."

Contemptuously he turned his back, presenting the broadest kind of a target a man could ask for. For it was a broader back than many men could offer to the sights of another man's gun. But he strode away with no fear. For Fatty had always depended upon Grant Meriwell's authority, more than upon his extremely doubtful gun skill, to give weight to his orders.

Now that it was plain that Merriwell proposed to stop him by any means possible, fair or foul, Jerkline determined to get out of town with his freight as soon as possible. But as he thundered down the board walk, back through town to his own corrals on the west side, he was about to pass the Great Western Saloon when he came face to face with Grant Meriwell himself.

The freighting czar, whose reign had been unchallenged until Jerkline had shown up with his mules, stepped from the batwings of the saloon just before the mule skinner passed them.

Jerkline stopped.

For a moment the two stood eyeing each other. Even on the raised step where Meriwell stood above the walk, he was not as tall as Jerkline. He had the sallow, yellowish skin of a man who saw too much of smoke murky gambling rooms and not enough of the sun.

A neatly trimmed mustache presided upon the short lip above his pinched, thin-lipped mouth. His hands were small, long-fingered, with a soft, dainty look and hung by the thumbs which were hooked in his vest pockets as he confronted Jerkline. But what he lacked in physical size he made up in arrogance, heralded by contour of his nose and the jutting angle of the cigar always clenched between his teeth.

"You better dig up something else to tote around that hunk of tin you call a Law shield," Jerkline suggested, speaking first. "Fatty don't get along well carrying the Law to fellers that ain't drawing their pay from you, Pretty Pants."

Meriwell flushed angrily at the slowly drawled name Jerkline had just tagged him with. He seemed about to yield to the impulse to spit out an angry, unpremeditated retort. Then checked himself. Glancing back past the batwings, he made a jerking nod of the head. Immediately the doors opened behind him. Four gun-hung strangers crowded out behind him.

"I've already foreseen Fatty's weakness,

mule skinner," he pointed out in clipped tones. "I'm not one to miss taking a pot I want by not having provided myself with the necessary cards to take it. Fatty might not have been able to use a gun on you, when you wouldn't go to jail, where you belong. But I'm not Fatty."

CHAPTER

3

Trail Law

One of Meriwell's soft hands shot inside his coat toward a shoulder holster. But he had miscalculated in letting Jerkline get so close, or in believing he would be impressed by the impressive array of hired guns in the doorway behind. For the young skinner went into action the same instant.

He nailed the Great Western czar as his grasping fingers closed upon his gun. Holding him before him, so that the hired guns could not be brought to bear upon him, Jerkline boxed Meriwell's ears with blows so lusty that the very first left the man senseless.

And then jerking him above his head, the giant young blond teamster hurled Meriwell's limp form into the midst of the gunmen before they could spread out and get him.

While the new Great Western gunhands were untangling themselves from each other and their senseless boss, Jerkline sprinted for the protection of the buildings across the street. He dodged into an opening between two, heading for the alley. And just too late, hot lead screamed into the walls behind him. He covered the rest of the way to the corrals in nothing flat, for he had been running a long bluff on Fatty Gordon.

He used guns so seldom for fighting that he had forgotten the possible need of one, that morning. Meriwell's new gunhawks would have had him like a sitting duck, with no way to fight back, had they caught him in the open. But their chance was gone when the young freighter got to his barn. For he had learned his lesson.

"Good gosh, boss!" Cass Cassway, Jerkline's lead driver, exclaimed several minutes later when he sighted the young freight boss striding toward him with a gun tied down to either thigh and looped ammunition belts around his lean waist. "You look like a chunk of walking artillery. How come?"

"Meriwell's imported some gunsharps, Cass," Jerkline grinned back soberly. "We may need all the artillery we've got. You ready to roll?"

"Ready," Cass nodded.

"Get 'em rolling, then," Jerkline declared. He turned. "Hi Up! Skinners. Fall in! Catch up! Let'm roll!" He sent his great voice pealing out over the flat, beyond the corrals, upon which the great three-wagon outfits stood waiting.

Immediately Cassway's long team settled into their collars, the lead team's hame bells tinkling. And as they swung toward the track that snaked away into the southwestern distance, another outfit came to life, falling in behind; and then another.

It was a sight that Jerkline had witnessed without number. Yet he thrilled to it now, just as he had thrilled to it the first time. It was one of those feelings that no man can account for. A feeling of pride and joy and thankfulness that he is alive. It was the feeling that had made Jerkline a freighter.

As the last of the ten great loads got under way, the young skinner wheeled back to the barn for his big saddle bronc. He was surprised when he did not find Bell waiting. He had expected she would be on hand to see the outfit underway. But there was no time to waste wondering about it. He swung into the saddle.

The wrangler was waiting at the gate of the corral in which milled the extra stock. He opened it when he saw Jerkline coming. Together they headed the frisking big mules out after the wagons. Here with his men, Jerkline held the odds. Meriwell let him go, unbothered.

A mile out, the trail snaked around the foot of a bluff and past the mouth of a gully that came down it. Jerkline reined up in surprise just short of the gully as Bell appeared out of it, astride her flashy pinto. He grinned at sight of her, but her face was sober.

"You see how easily you could be bush-whacked if you aren't careful," she declared. "There are a thousand places better than this where Meriwell's men could hide and take you unawares. I—I hate to see you go, Jerkline."

"Bell," he chided, smiling. "You think I can't take my part? Plenty of young Injun bucks would give plenty for this blond scalp of mine. All these years I've felt their jeal-

ous heathen eyes on it. But I've still got it. No blundering, splay-footed white man's got a chance of collecting it."

"Just be careful, that's all, honey."

"**H**ONEY!" Jerkline's eyes widened and a slow smile spread across his dark cheeks. "Say, maybe I'd better whale the seat of your pants again if that's the way it makes you talk to me.

"Two years now I've been wondering if you thought there was anything lower than me, judging by the way those cold eyes of yours always looked me over. And then I take the flat of my hand to you—and you call me honey. Man!"

"You're not mad about—about what I did, then?" she murmured.

He reined his big black close to her pinto. "Mad? I'll show you how mad I am." He swept her out of her saddle as if she had been a tiny child, seated her across the saddle before him, and kissed her.

"I ought to slap your face for—for—" Bell pushed away from him embarrassed and flustered.

"Don't try it, sis," the big teamster murmured, "or I'll take the flat of my hand to you again. It does a girl good to be kissed once in awhile. You got no idea how much just that one has improved your looks. You look now like maybe you got some real warm blood in your veins instead of just ice water."

"Oh you big—bully!" A look of alarm had flashed into Bell's eyes and she caught her breath in short gasps. "I've been a fool! I never should have let you or any other man see—Put me down!"

"Shaw now, girl, why should you feel like that?" Jerkline chuckled. "You're happier with things like this, aren't you?"

But Bell's face had changed. Once more her features were frozen in her usual, cameo-like mask. "Security isn't as elusive as happiness," she murmured, eyeing him straightly. "I'm sorry, partner. I almost made a real female fool of myself. At least I don't indulge myself as often as most women do. Now—put me down, please."

Bewildered, Jerkline deposited her in her own saddle once more. "You act like being human, showing a little feeling, is a damned disgrace," he growled.

"It's just not practical for a woman in my—my position," Bell returned, resigna-

tion in the gaze she held upon the distance that unrolled out ahead. "I just didn't realize how easy it was to—well, how quickly things can get out of hand if you indulge yourself just the least bit when it comes to feelings," she explained. "I am worried about you—your safety. I wanted you to know and to know I'm really sorry and I wanted to wish you luck and— Well, this other just happened. So please forget it. But you will be careful, won't you?" She caught his hand, gave it a hard grip, and reined quickly away.

CHAPTER

4

Law of the Trail

When the outfit circled for camp that night, as the purple shadows slowly blackened, they already had made up for the time lost in starting. They had covered more ground than the Great Western bull-whacking outfits could have plodded over in two long days.

The teamsters were in good spirits and Jerkline helped it along by bringing in a yearling antelope when he returned from a late afternoon scout.

"See any Injun sign, boss?" a buck-toothed skinner from Missouri asked as they waited for the cook to yelp his supper call.

"Nope," Jerkline replied. "I wasn't much looking for none though. It's two-legged skunks with white hides I'm sort of expecting. We'll be hearing from Meriwell before long, or I've got the old dandy figured wrong."

"Hell, surely no dumb bullwhacker'd be dumb enough to consider jumping this many mule skinnners, would they?" joked a burly old line-popper, almost as massive as Jerkline himself.

"It won't be bullwhackers that Meriwell hits us with," the young freighter prophesied. "He'll have the best and dirtiest fighters that booze or money can buy."

"Let 'em come," another skinner grinned wolfishly. "A man's got to get a little excitement out of life."

"That's all right so long as he keeps on his toes and doesn't let the excitement sneak up on his blind side," Jerkline pointed out. "Otherwise he's liable not to live long enough to enjoy it."

"No varmint of no kind, two legged or otherwise, is going to have an easy time of it sneaking up on this outfit's blind side," Cass Casswell assured his young boss.

But Jerkline found himself unable to shake his feeling of foreboding. He was beginning to feel the effects of his drugged sleep of the night before. And he knew the others must feel it too, or would be feeling it soon.

Even the satisfaction of a stomach of good food did not quiet his suspicions. But it did add to the physical weight of the fatigue that had begun to press down upon him, threatening to overpower his senses.

Jerkline posted the first guard and watched the others seek their beds early. But he stuck by the fire, keeping the coffee pot boiling. Every half hour he made the rounds with the pot in one hand and a cup in the other, pretending he was merely feeling sociable. But whether that ruse worked or not, the coffee and his frequent reappearance did keep the guards alert and on their toes.

FINALLY it was time to call the second guard, and the men who had stood the first turned thankfully to their beds. But Jerkline stuck to his self-appointed task. He had downed so much coffee that it had turned bitter in his mouth. Still he stayed at it.

But finally, with only an hour of the second watch left, the insistence of his body for some rest growing ever stronger, he decided upon a compromise. He told the guards to arouse him when they called their relief for the third guard. Then he stretched out before the fire.

A chill of alarm jerked him out of the deep sleep into which he had fallen the instant he relaxed his vigilance against it. Somewhere nearby a mule was braying. He had the feeling that he had overslept, even before he caught sight of the eastern sky and found a grey strip of thinning blackness growing upon the horizon there.

"Skinners! Roll out!" he bellowed, stumbling to his feet. He glanced around for fuel to throw on the fire, which had burned down to coals. But he forgot about it as his keen ear caught the drum of hoofbeats in the predawn blackness somewhere not far away.

Jerkline hurried outside the circled wagons. He came upon a guard who was in

the act of rubbing sleep from his eyes.

"Did you hear riders—traveling horses?" Jerkline murmured in a guarded tone.

"Why—"

The guard's answer was lost in a sudden rush of sound that came at them from the night just beyond, as whooping warriors charged the camp with hideous warcries driving before them. Two minutes before they would have taken the freight outfit completely off guard.

As it was, Jerkline and the guard were the only ones pouring lead into the first charge. But the young freighter's pair of heavy .44 Colts spit enough lead in those first few minutes to make up for the rifle fire of a half-dozen men. And the fast moving, shadowy attackers veered off to re-form for another try.

But they had missed their big chance of doing real damage to the camp, for they had lost the advantage of surprise. The mule herd galloped into camp ahead of the spurting nighthawk as the teamsters got set for the next rush.

Jerkline realized it had been the smell of the approaching redskins that had caused the braying that had awakened him. Again he thanked the stars that he was a mule skinner and not a bullwhacker.

Then the second attack came. But the light had grown strong enough to see gun-sights. And the teamsters threw out a fire that stopped the warriors cold, dropping them right and left. The survivors turned and fled without even attempting to retrieve their dead.

"Damn redskins'll learn to jump this outfit I guess," a big skinner boasted.

"There wasn't no wise old chief giving out the orders in that bunch," Jerkline reminded. "We was just lucky it was a bunch of young smart-alecks or drunks that hit us instead of a real war party."

"They was drunks," a grizzled old skinner announced coming back in from a brief inspection of a few of the Indian dead. "Looks like someone talked them into making this try and staked 'em to plenty of hooch to warm 'em up on the idea."

"What are they?" Jerkline asked.

"Blackfeet," a second oldster declared. "If someone's talking up a fight against us, them dead ones will give them some strong points with the old bucks that really know something about fighting. Blackfeet don't like whites much anyhow."

"Get your mules grained and let's roll 'em!" Jerkline ordered. And the excitement of the brief skirmish with the band of young *coup* hunting braves was forgotten in the rush of activity that went with catching the mules of one's team out of the milling bunch.

In the center, swearing at the dust and cussing an outfit that would let the livestock inside the camp, the old cook struggled to get a bait of grub ready before the men were ready for it.

A HALF-HOUR later the outfit was ready to break camp when four nondescript, four-horse teams and wagons rattled up behind and pulled up along side.

"Who's boss of the outfit, skimmers?" a rough, black-bearded individual, perched on the seat of the lead wagon, called.

"I'm the man," Jerkline replied, reining his black that way. "What can I do for you?"

"We seen a bunch of Injuns sizing us up back yonder about daybreak," the stranger declared, "and we'd like to throw in with your outfit as far as we go together. We're headed for Alder Gulch."

"Taking more in with you than most miners do," Jerkline observed dryly, wishing he could find some grounds upon which to refuse the fellow. For there was chance enough that Meriwell might have bought a man among his own skimmers, without taking the further risk of accepting these strangers. But the law of mutual protection was too strong on the trail to be denied without good grounds, and offhand he could see none. "What do you call yourselves?"

"I'm Doug Morgan and on the wagons behind is Tom Jessic, Lew Barnes, and John Finney. We figure to trade at the diggings, not mine."

"All right. Fall in behind my last wagon," Jerkline directed.

"That's kind of putting us in the most exposed place, isn't it?" Morgan complained.

"I suppose you want me to split my outfit and put you in the middle?" Jerkline asked with irritation. "If you don't like being behind my last wagon, you can go on being the lead wagon—of your own outfit." He reined away before his instant dislike for the man could be displayed any stronger.

The freight outfit stretched out upon the trail again as the sun topped the horizon. Looking down upon it from a hilltop to one side, Jerkline experienced a thrill of satisfaction at the sight of his own outfit, but the four little wagons behind marred his pleasure.

Reining the big black down the far side of the hill, out of sight from the wagons, he circled back and came into the trail behind. Suspicion and curiosity prompted him to backtrail. But a two-hour ride failed to bring him upon any sign of a fresh camp. When at last he turned back to catch up with his outfit, he was convinced that Morgan had been lying.

CHAPTER

5

Bloody Chips

The outfit was nooning, the men eating while the mules munched grain from nose bags, when Jerkline caught up. He rode past Morgan and his three companions, giving them a brief nod as they grouped around a small fire of their own by their wagons at the rear.

He wanted to question the man and force straight answers out of him, by sheer brute strength if necessary. But his judgment advised against it, at least until he had something stronger to go on than failure to find their last night's camp.

"Where do you figure to camp tonight?" Morgan called when Jerkline did not check his black, plainly entertaining no intention of stopping.

"Up the river," was the skinner's non-committal reply, made without turning in the saddle as he kept going.

"You boys keep your eyes out for any funny business from them four," he warned when he reached his men. "They may be just traders like they said. But they wanted to catch up with us almighty bad for some reason. They drove all last night to come up with us, or else they're just so neat they don't leave sign where they camp."

"You think maybe they're in with Meriwell's bullwhacking outfit someway?" Cass Cassaway asked. "They sure ain't teamsters, that's a gut. You should of seen them coming down the long hill back yonder. I thought sure them little old farmers' wagons of theirs was going to get plumb away from them."

"They don't seem to have much in them either," another teamster spoke up. "Ain't a horse in any of them four-horse teams of theirs that'll weigh over a thousand pounds, but they just walk up the grades like they wasn't pulling a pound. I'll bet there ain't a one of them turned a hair this morning, and a horse sweats before a mule ever will—and my mules have sweat."

"Just watch them," Jerkline repeated. "That ox-loving Meriwell crook caught us off guard with a dirty play once. Out here just once would be once too often."

"Don't worry, boss," a young skinner joked as they broke up and headed for their wagons, "my hair still looks better on my haid than it could decorating some Injun's britches. I ain't going to have no trouble keeping my eyes open no more."

Jerkline wolfed down a thick antelope steak and a half loaf of bread while Greasy stowed his cooking equipment in a trailer and the swampers gathered nose bags from the mules. Then the outfit was ready to roll. And their unwelcome companions again fell in behind them.

All that afternoon Jerkline kept a sharp lookout. Still he failed to catch sight of any prowling Indians or come across any fresh sign.

But his suspicions were not quieted any. He had a premonition of trouble and in the past such feelings had never deceived him. Somewhere, he felt certain, there was something afoot. It stood to reason, for if Meriwell let them reach the Continental Divide, beyond Last Chance Gulch, his most favorable opportunity to do them permanent harm would be past.

THE sun was still an hour above the horizon when the young wagon boss sent the order, "Turn in!" back along the lie. He led the way as Cass Cassaway swung his lead team from the trail and began the circle.

At the rear he saw the small horse drawn outfits stop and the four drivers hit the ground and bunch up as if for a conference. He reined back that way, confident that Cass could complete the circle.

"What's the idea wasting this daylight?" the fellow called Morgan demanded as Jerkline reined up before them. "We could travel a couple of hours yet and still have plenty of light to make camp."

"Sure we could," the young freighter

agreed, "but it takes a good deal more than two hours to get beyond them narrows the trail heads into just ahead," his arm swung out in a sweeping forward motion indicating the narrow, box-like canyon out of which the Missouri tumbled just beyond.

It was as bad a stretch as there was along the trail, but the only way heavy freight wagons could get through the jumble of rocky hills piled up along either side of the river there. "I ain't inviting an ambush if I can help it."

"You're sure a suspicious cuss," Morgan growled.

"I've known other fellers thought I was overly suspicious," Jerkline replied good naturedly. "Today their hair is decorating some buck's fancy leggings. You fellows are welcome to keep right on going if you'd rather. My wagons are off the trail now so there's nothing in your way."

"No, we'd rather stick close to help, just in case there is any trouble," Morgan declined. "We'll just circle our outfits and camp here so we won't cause you any bother or be in your way."

For a moment Jerkline wondered if he had misjudged them. But he did not let the thought bother him.

"Suit yourselves," he declared. Then he reined away. He had a camp of his own to organize.

The site upon which he had circled his outfit was flat ground beside the river. The bank dropped an abrupt ten feet to the water so that one side at least was safe from any possible attack. On the other sides there was nothing to afford cover or protection for attackers.

And across the river was an elbow of low meadow hemmed in by the river and covered with rank grass from which there was no danger of the mules straying. The place had taken Jerkline's eye the first time he had seen it, years before. He felt that if Meriwell had any trouble planned for them tonight, that they could not ask for a better place to face it.

When the stock was cared for, several of the skinnners took advantage of the unusual opportunity of leisure in daylight and went fishing. One of Morgan's companions strolled away too, going into the canyon above with a fishing pole over his shoulder, Jerkline noticed.

But a little later, when the sun had gone and all his men had returned so that their

catches might be cooked for supper, he had not seen the trader come back. Then all thought of it was driven from his mind as a terror-stricken cry of alarm: "Fire!" jerked every eye toward the small camp one hundred yards away.

"COME on, boys!" a skinner yelled as they saw flames reach for the canvas top of one of the small wagons. "Them fellers got trouble."

Instinctively the men sprang forward to help in the emergency. And Jerkline was at the head of his men as they raced across the space separating the two camps.

But as they neared, the skinner boss caught a fleeting glimpse of two of the traders scurrying away into the deepening shadows beyond. One other had not returned from up the canyon, and the fourth man should be out with their horses. The remaining two were deserting their flaming camp without even a try at fighting the fire.

Jerkline stopped short, his men crowding up behind him. And even as he did so, the thunder of many racing hoofs swept out of the narrow canyon just above and down upon them. Hard behind came the hideous ringing challenge of warcries.

"Injuns!" The word was gasped by half a dozen men at once.

"This renegade outfit sucked us out in the open for them! Get back to the wagons, men!" Jerkline roared, jerking his sixguns from leather. "Run for it!"

And as his men raced back toward shelter, the big blond-headed skinner began pouring lead into the ranks of the oncoming horde, knocking horses from under lead riders and causing minor pileups.

He had no hope of stopping the charge, but each time a horse fell and piled up others pressing up from behind, it slowed the charge another fraction. And so with each bullet he was buying another infinitesimal bit of time with only the hope that their sum would be enough to get his men back inside camp where they could make a fight.

Then Jerkline's guns snapped on empties and there was no time to reload. But before he could drop them and reach for his knife something jerked him from his feet.

It was as if giant fingers snatched at his middle and jerked him high into the air. He came down hard on his rump, but he was still traveling. And so fast there was

no time to figure it out. All his dazed mind was sure of was the ever increasing pressure squeezing his middle.

There were screaming whoops of rage, too, from the oncoming Indians as they saw the defiant white giant snatched from before them. But there was no thrill of escape in the big skinner, for he felt, in a dazed way, that he would soon be as dead as he could ever have been at the hands of the Indians.

Then he realized he was somehow inside the circled wagons, his men crowding around.

"Give them hell! Give them hell, boys! Give them hell!" he heard himself muttering.

"We've already rolled them back the first time, boss," Cass Cassaway exclaimed with delight. "I had the boys break out a box of them Army rifles from one of the wagons and we threw out a rapid fire the likes of which redskins never seen before. We'd never made it though, without you slowing the howling devils up the way you did."

"How'd I manage to get back?" Jerkline wondered.

"I SAW you standing out there like you didn't have brains enough to get in outa the rain," a cool feminine voice sounded in his still roaring ears, jerking his eyes to one side in surprise. He found Mae McGill before him. "I didn't have time to ask you to ride, so I took down my rope and give you a tow in."

"Where'd you come from—"

"Here they come again, boys," a cry of alarm cut him off. Jerkline stumbled to his feet and found his guns still clutched in either hand. He began reloading, but his hands were still unsteady and awkward from the shaking up he had taken, being dragged over the rough sod on the end of a lass rope at a dead run.

Lead screamed through the air around him as the Indian braves swept in out of the thickening dusk firing like mad men. But he was concentrating so intently upon steadying his shaky hands so he could reload that he hardly noticed. And before he had punched the last fresh shell home, the second attack had been driven back.

"I about killed my horse trying to catch you in time to warn you of this," he heard a voice at his side as the firing tapered off and he snapped the second cylinder into

place. Mae McGill was again beside him, a smoking rifle in her hands.

"My head's still full of dust, but go ahead," he murmured encouragement.

"My father regained consciousness this morning, early, before he died," the girl said, pausing a moment as she closed her teeth upon her lower lip, the only visible sign of the struggle she had to make to maintain a grip upon her emotions.

In a moment she hurried on. "He told me the whole story. It was Meriwell men who beat him up when he raised a rumpus about you being drugged. He had intended asking you for a job. He had learned that Great Western bought the Indians' good will by giving them guns and ammunition to use against other whites. He meant to warn you of Meriwell's plan to get four of his renegades into your train with wagon loads of coaloil. One way or another, they were to fire it at the proper time to enable the Indians to wipe you out. What guns and ammunition the redskins could get out of it were theirs."

"The only ammunition they'll get out of this train is the lead they pack away in their own hides," Cass Casswell's jubilant voice declared, nearby.

"Has Meriwell got any more tricks up his sleeve?" Jerkline asked as he got his thoughts straightened out.

"One," Jerkline missed the look of pained reluctance in Mae's eyes as he demanded: "What is it?"

"He's waiting to hear from this fight," the girl said slowly. "If it isn't the wipe-out he planned, he is going to grab Bell O'Daie. He seems to think you'd give up about anything you have to buy her safety."

"I sure would!" Jerkline declared. "That dirty snake. I'll tromp his crooked carcass into jelly when I catch him."

He missed the look in Mae's eyes, but Cass Casswell did not.

"You think you boys can handle the redskins, Cass?" the big, young skinner boss demanded suddenly.

"Boss, we wouldn't of had a smell of a chance without that grizzly bear stand you made on your lonesome out there," his lieutenant declared, "but now I think we can handle things from here on out right handy. And don't worry about Mae. I'll see no harm comes her way."

"Rise and shine boys! They're coming

in again!" a leather-lunged teamster somewhere raised the third alarm. But Jerkline grabbed his saddle, instead of a gun, and headed across the river to catch-up a horse.

NIGHT'S blackest hour, the last before dawn, lay over the big wild country as Jerkline pushed his jaded horse into the outskirts of Benton. Unbroken quiet lay over the little town. At first he failed to find a single trace of light anywhere.

Then, as he neared, he caught a narrow strip showing below the blind over a window of Bell's apartment above the Square Deal. With a feeling of hope and thankfulness in his heart, he reined that way.

But as Jerkline reined up at the rear of the big building, a man stepped from the shadows near the wall.

"That you Morgan?" he murmured. "How'd the fight come off?"

Without even taking time to plan his action, Jerkline sprang, lunging from the saddle. His big hands-grasped the fellow, one closing upon his throat, before he could gasp an alarm. A moment later the gunman shuddered and went limp.

Only then did the big skinner realize that in his pent up rage he had forgotten the power of his long fingers. He had crushed the fellow's throat. Even so, he found no regret within him.

Cat-footing it up the outside stairs, he entered the hallway outside Bell's apartment. Voices came to him clearly.

"Meriwell, I didn't invite you here and I didn't like the way you shouldered in with your gun thugs," he heard Bell saying. "I'm tired now and I wish you would go. I've had all the poker I want for one night, and I think you should too, the way your luck's been running. I have most of your roll now, and I don't want any more of your dirty money."

"I guess poker just isn't my game to-night," Meriwell's suave drawl murmured. "But I've had a hand in other more important games that have been played to-night. And I'm sure my luck ran better there. I'm not worried about the money—"

"Haw, haw! Why don't you tell her, boss?" a strange voice gawfed.

"Tell me what?"

"You heard the rider that came into town a few minutes ago?" the Great Western owner reminded. "I think he'll be com-

ing up here, he and Duke, in another minute with some good news. At first I figured if the news was good, I'd be satisfied to leave here with just my money. But I hate to see anything go to waste. And you, my dear, have gone to waste for ten years in this hole. No matter what the news is, I've decided when I leave here tonight I'll take my money and you, both, with me."

Jerkline chose that moment to go through the door. He went with both guns ready, and Bell's cold eyes caught sight of him first. But he knew what terror there must be hidden beneath her frozen exterior.

She came to life before anyone else could move, jerking up from her chair and bringing the table with her. She sent it plunging over against the stranger who had been opposite her, one of the gunmen who had backed Meriwell the morning Jerkline left town.

Meriwell lunged for her, but she scrambled clear, knocking the other gunman off balance as he tried to draw. But she was still too near the renegades for Jerkline to risk a shot.

Then the first gunman was scrambling clear of the table, coming up with his gun lining down upon the young freighter. And Jerkline managed to get his first shot off in time. The renegade folded up with a gurgling gasp as his lead snarled through Jerkline's hair.

But the second hired killer had rolled as he hit the floor. Coming up in a crouch now, he had Jerkline lined in his sights, dead to rights. Even as Jerkline sensed the new menace and swiveled to meet it, a cold chill swept his innerds as instinct screamed that he was too late.

A new gun spoke up. And the renegade's face disintegrated in a bloody mess before he could squeeze his trigger. His gun drove lead into the floor as he collapsed loosely upon it.

Jerkline got a fleeting glimpse of Bell, pale faced and wide eyed, the smoking muzzle of a short-barreled derringer jutting from one tense, long-fingered hand. Then he was staggering, rocked back on his heels as Meriwell's lead caught him along the left ribs.

As his broad back crashed into the wall, he steadied himself, brought his sights down upon the crooked freight czar's middle, and squeezed the trigger. He saw Meriwell knife to the floor, screaming. And

then Bell was in his arms, holding him up until his brain stopped swimming from the pain of his bullet-burned ribs.

"You might have been killed! You might have been killed," he heard her sobbing when he could get his breath right again and his ears stopped buzzing. Bell was trying to stop the bleeding from his wound, but he brought a hand up and cupped her chin in it, lifting her eyes to his. He found tears in them and no ice at all.

"Is this just another one of those times when feeling that you don't want just sort of gets out of hand for the time being, like the other morning?" he asked.

"NO NO!" Bell cried in a low voice. "I do want it. I wanted it the other morning, but—I've been afraid to be myself ever since they murdered Daddy. I knew it was Meriwell. He wanted the saloon. That's one reason I vowed I'd run it and make it pay. But I was scared. After all the terrible things Daddy had warned me of about men, I was scared to death of them.

"But when the word came that he was gone I knew I didn't dare let men know how afraid of them and weak I was. That's another reason I decided to keep the Square Deal going, so they'd have to meet me on my own ground. That's how it's been for ten long years now—always wondering if surely there wasn't just one man out of all the rest that I could trust. But I didn't know how to tell.

"I had to keep the ice between me and all of them for fear I might let the wrong one find out I was just as—just like any woman. Sometimes I thought I'd rather be dead than go on alone and afraid any longer. But I'm not afraid anymore. Not now. I've been so afraid the last few minutes I'll never be afraid again.

"When I saw you burst through that door, so big and wonderful and yet somehow so terrible, with your guns in your hands, the old fear dropped away. I just seemed to know I'd never have to worry again about someone to trust. And then they started shooting at you and—" she broke off sobbing, burying her copper haired head against his shoulder. For another moment Jerkline stood spellbound.

"You mean there's never been anyone else you ever let—well, I mean, anyone else

you ever trusted even a little?" he finally demanded. He had come to think of Bell as the calmest, coldest, most poised and self-sufficiently self-possessed woman he had ever known.

And now to learn that all the time she had hidden beneath her frozen exterior an agony of lonely fear confused him. He was hardly able to comprehend the new relationship that had opened between them so unexpectedly, though he had always hoped for her love and trust without hope of ever getting it.

"I mean," Bell raised her head, her big grey eyes looking into the depths of his, "whether you can believe it or not, I've never been kissed, until you kissed me the other morning, before by any man except my father. I was afraid to let any man feel he could touch me—for fear he'd see through the ice."

"I'm glad!" Jerkline grinned suddenly, his big arms closing upon her. "I'm glad, because I reckon that otherwise a big, horse-faced skinner like me wouldn't never have had one chance in a million with a girl like you, Bell. Your being afraid and lonely days are over now, though, as long as you can stand having me around." He leaned down to meet her ready lips and kissed her long and gently.

"Try and get away from me, now," Bell whispered breathlessly when Jerkline straightened again. And then the pound of many feet on the stair outside brought them back to earth. Jerkline glanced around.

"Gosh this place has gotten messy! What say we find the Judge while they clean it up? And then, well—I never heard of honeymooning on a jackass freight outfit, but—wanta try it?"

"I'd love it," Bell declared, coming up on tip-toe for one more quick kiss. "Just try getting back to your mules without me. I believe in protecting my interests, personal. Do you think I'd let you be with those mules alone—and risk you forgetting which one, me or them, you love the most?" she teased.

"Come on," she caught his hand, hurrying toward a door that opened on an inside stair which would take them beyond the curious crowd that would soon crowd the room. "Let's find Judge Tucker. If we hurry we can get out of town without a shivaree."

The Button Goes to War

"Give me those shells!"



By **RAY GAULDEN**

Young Corey Raine tried to help his kill-crazy brother—before the return of their lawman father.

COREY RAINE drew his spotted pony to the side of the trail when he spied the rider coming towards him. The twelve-year-old youngster recognized Jeb Bell, a neighboring rancher, and Corey thought the man looked a little excited.

Bell reined in. "Hi yuh, Corey. Hear about what happened in town?"

The short-nosed, freckle-faced button shook his head, a little chill of warning snaking along his spine.

Bell said, "That brother of yours finally

kicked over the traces. He stuck up the bank and shot the cashier."

Corey felt suddenly sick, as though he had been kicked in the stomach. He said hoarsely, "You must be wrong, Jeb! Boyce wouldn't shoot nobody!"

Jeb's lips twisted. "Kid, that bud of yours has been buildin' up to somethin' like this for a long time. But he's not gettin' away with it. They shot his horse out from under him. He's holin' up in that old deserted shack back of town, but they've got it surrounded and they'll smoke him out."

Corey didn't wait to hear more. He nudged the pinto and they went racing down the trail toward town. Dread was an icy lump in the kid's belly and the freckles stood out on his chalk-white face. He groaned as he thought about his father, Sheriff Bill Raine, going after Boyce.

Old Bill Raine wasn't really their father, but, to Corey, he was the finest, squarest man who ever lived. He had found the two boys when Corey was just a baby and Boyce was seven. Their parents had been killed by renegades in a wagon-trail raid.

Bill Raine had given them a home and raised them as his own sons. He had been good to them—too good some folks said. And Corey knew it was true. Bill was getting old; he wouldn't be able to work much longer, and he should be saving some of his money. But he didn't. Corey knew that Boyce got most of it to throw away in the saloons and across the poker tables.

And when old Bill saw that Corey was worried about the way his brother was doing, he smiled and said that Boyce was just having his fling, that he would straighten out in time. And Corey hoped he was right, for he loved that brother of his even though Boyce was a little wild.

Corey pounded into the little town of Mesa Grande, the crackle of gunfire sending panic through him. He pulled up in front of the general store, was out of the saddle before the pinto even stopped. On a little hill back of the store was the old deserted shack and Corey saw a stab of flame lick from one of the windows. Hope flared in him briefly. At least Boyce was still alive. But what about old Bill?

The kid started down the alley next to the store and Pat Baker, the storekeeper called to him from the porch. "Better stay back, son. You might get hurt up there."

Corey paused, his lips colorless. "Where's

Sheriff Bill, Pat?" Corey asked quickly.

The storekeeper glanced down the street. "He hasn't got here yet, boy. He rode out to the Rafter T this afternoon. Somebody's gone to fetch him and he ought to be here before long. But I reckon they'll have Boyce smoked out in a few minutes. He can't have many bullets left."

Corey spun about and ran down to the gunsmith's shop. He got some cartridges and hurried out, raced back to the alley and across the creek. He had to get to Boyce, had to try to talk to him before old Bill got here. The kid shuddered to think what might happen.

He could see some of the townsmen who had the shack on the hill surrounded. He spied Bart Crawley, the blacksmith, crouched in a nest of boulders. A spray bullet whined close to Corey and he flopped down on his belly and crawled along until he reached the rocks. Bart Crawley stopped firing for a moment and looked at him disapprovingly.

"You hadn't oughta be here, boy," the blacksmith said.

Corey stared at the man desperately. "Bart, let me go up there," he said fiercely. "Boyce is scared—he don't know what he's doin'. I might could talk to him."

The blacksmith appeared undecided, then he sighed. "Old Bill might give me the devil, but it's worth a try to keep some good men from gettin' killed." He turned and called loudly, "Hold your fire, boys. You too, Boyce. Your kid brother is comin' up to talk to you."

The guns quit chattering and Corey moved up the hill, his breath whistling between his teeth, a cold, heavy lump inside him. He came close to the shack and he could see Boyce beside a window, watching him. He could feel the eyes of the townsmen on his back.

Boyce Raine said sharply, "Come on in, kid, and shut the door."

The slender, tawny-eyed man beside the window had blood on his face and his lips were tight. He looked at the kid through narrowed eyes. Corey went pale at sight of the blood.

"Boyce! You hurt bad?"

"No. Just a scratch, kid, but I'm runnin' low on shells. I wish you had brought some along."

Corey studied his brother's face. "Well, I did bring some along, Boyce," he said.

"But I was hopin' you wouldn't use them. I was kinda hopin' I could get you to give yourself up before old Bill gets here."

Boyce Raine had two guns on the floor beside him. He threw a glance down the hill, then looked back at Corey, a wild light in his eyes. "I can't give myself up, kid," he said dismally. "I shot a man and if he dies, it'll mean a hangnoose for me. You wouldn't want to see that happen, would you?"

COREY'S throat was tight and hurting. He felt worse than he ever had before. "No, Boyce," he said, "I wouldn't want to see nothin' like that happen."

Boyce smiled crookedly. "Then get those shells out and give me a hand. It will be dark in a little while. If I can hold them off till then, I can make a break."

Corey's legs felt stiff as he moved across the room and hunkered down beside the slender man. He emptied some of the cartridges out on the floor and began to load one of the guns. "I'll help you, Boyce," he said, "as long as Bill's not here. If you ain't able to get away before he comes, you got to promise me you'll give yourself up."

Boyce's tawny eyes glowed strangely. "Sure, kid. I promise."

Corey watched him take one of the guns and fire at the rocks where the blacksmith was. The kid heard Crawley yell, "Let the dirty son have it!"

Numb and cold, Corey hunkered there and wondered if his brother would keep his promise and give himself up when the sheriff came. The kid prayed fervently that Bill wouldn't come, that something would detain him. As though in a daze, he kept loading the guns, not wanting to, but telling himself that he couldn't let them take Boyce.

Suddenly the firing ceased and Corey's heart went into his mouth. Horror washed over him as he heard Bill Raine's voice down there in the gathering darkness. The kid sprang to the window and peered out. He saw the lawman coming up the hill, looking old and tired, but his tread was firm.

A curse ripped from Boyce's lips and his eyes were wicked. Corey grabbed hold

of his arm. "You got to give yourself up now!"

The slender man's lips peeled back in a snarl. "Like hell! I'm gettin' out of here!"

Corey clung to him. "No, Boyce! Bill won't let you get away. You'll have to kill him!"

Boyce knocked the kid's hands loose. He said harshly, "I can do that, too!" He glanced at his gun and cursed, flung the empty weapon across the room, snatched up the one Corey had been about to load. The kid had the shells clutched tightly in his hand and he took a step back, his lips trembling.

Boyce grabbed Corey's throat, shoved him back against the wall. "Give me those shells!"

His face white, Corey let them fall to the floor. He watched his brother scoop them up, jam them into the gun. Then Boyce leaped for the door.

Half sobbing, Corey stumbled to the window. He heard Bill say quietly, "Drop that gun, Boyce!"

"To hell with you!" Boyce said flatly.

Bill Raine was still coming forward, his face grim. Corey saw his gun coming up and the kid gripped the sides of the window hard, watched with aching eyes. He saw Boyce's gun jump and flame stabbed at the lawman. But Bill didn't stop. Boyce shot again and then the sheriff's piece was speaking. He shot twice and he didn't miss. Boyce staggered back and began to sag. He looked at the window where the kid was and a bitter smile pulled at his lips.

Corey slumped to the floor and stared dully at the wall. Bill Raine came in and hunkered down beside him, put his hand on his shoulder.

"Don't feel too bad, son. Boyce wasn't really your brother. I knew that day I found you, but I thought it would be kind of nice if you two could grow up together thinkin' you was."

Corey wiped at his eyes. He felt better now and it wouldn't bother him so much when he remembered how he had given Boyce that last handful of shells—the ones he had brought along just in case—the blanks.



MUSTANG FIGHTERS

Teeth bared, the
mustang rushed his
captor. . . .

By CHARLES
IRWIN



Exciting tales of wild horses—
some can be trained . . . others
chose death.

AT HIS Texas rancho, Senor Santa Ana Cruz stood among a gathering of twelve hand-picked *mesteñeros*. "Amigos, un medico de San Antonio," he announced, "has offered five hundred American dollars to deliver *el Caballo Blanco* to him in sound condition."

Five hundred dollars, in the middle eighteen hundreds, was a fortune. But *el Caballo Blanco*—yi! The White Stallion, the Deathless White Pacer. Many had tried for him before.

Countless thousands of *mesteños* roved the plains. Yes, but those that were any good at all sold for two dollars a head. An extraordinary mustang might bring five dollars. Well, perhaps *el Senor Dios* willed that *el Caballo Blanco* might now—possibly—be brought in.

Finding *el Caballo Blanco* was easy. He, with his *manada*, usually watered on Onion

Creek near the falls. No *mesteñero* could fail to recognize him on sight. Tail brushing the grass, mane sweeping his knees, his only gait other than a walk was a pace. The white had all the markings of a pure-bred Arab. His herd of mares usually numbered sixty—two to six times that of ordinary mustang *manadas*.

Through binoculars, *el Caballo Blanco* was spotted on Onion Creek. Cruz placed his mustangers, each with two horses chosen for speed and endurance, at strategic points. The chase began.

The White Stallion roared at his mares, started driving them in the direction of San Antonio. Gradually he was crowded harder and harder. When one of the mares lagged, he retraced his steps, bit at her, drove her back to the herd.

But every animal of his family was finally run down. For three days and nights the

mestñeros pursued. The White Stallion, though, had not once broken his single-footing.

Two of Cruz's men trailed him across the Frio River. Then they gave up. *El Caballo Blanco* was still pacing tirelessly toward the Rio Grande.

He never returned to Onion Creek. Later, Cruz learned why.

A vaquero of the Chaparro Prieto ranch, situated between the Rio Grande and the Nueces, sighted a white horse drinking from a waterhole in a boxed-in canyon.

"He looks jaded," muttered the vaquero. "Let him drink, and become sluggish."

He waited at the one exit of the canyon. At last the lone horse quit the waterhole. When he paced close, the vaquero breathed, "*Madre de Dios—es el Caballo Blanco!*"

Loop ready, the vaquero cast. Sensing a trap, the stallion evaded the noose. Recoiling his reata, the vaquero quirted in pursuit. His second loop encircled the stallion's neck.

Now, something least expected happened. The mustang did not run the rope out and throw himself, as they usually did. Instead, he wheeled. Teeth bared, he rushed his captor. The vaquero lost no time in spurring his mount. He got a mesquite between himself and the vicious mustang.

In a twinkle, *el Caballo Blanco* was tied close. The vaquero hit at a high lope for Chaparro Prieto for help. He returned with two *compañeros*. With much difficulty they drove and led the plunging mustang near the ranch corrals. Here they fixed a clog on his forefoot, and staked him.

They brought him water. Grass was plentiful around him. But *el Caballo Blanco* would not eat one bite or drink one swallow. He remained there for ten days and nights. Then he lay down and died.

There *were* mustangs who simply could not be managed by man. When a boy, Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance walked with his tribesmen in pursuit of a herd ruled by a magnificent steel-dust known as "the Ghost."

Recent storms had driven away the saddie horses of the Blackfeet. On the Columbia River, between the Rockies and the Cascades, the Indians came upon the herd (or herds) numbering at least five hundred mustangs.

"Hoh! Hoh!" the braves grunted softly as they approached. "Hoh! Hoh!"

This big steel-dust stallion jerked up his head. All the herd raised their heads, stood as statues while scrutinizing the Blackfeet. Suddenly "the Ghost" roared. Then he plunged straight toward the unmounted Indians.

His five hundred followers followed at his heels. Within a few paces from the tribe, the mustangs stiffened their forelegs, skidded to a dusty halt. Then they wheeled, raced away.

But the big steel-dust remained a while. He dug the earth under him. Swinging his head defiantly, he blazed fire from wide-spread nostrils and flinty eyes. When satisfied he had impressed the braves of his defiance, he kicked up his heels and galloped after the herd.

The Indians laughed. " 'The Ghost' is a brave warrior," they told one another. "But we will yet ride him against the Crow."

THE Blackfeet knew their mustangs. Depending on their knowledge that horses are curious animals, they were confident that this never-satisfied curiosity would end with wholesale capture. The mustangs were forever trotting back, watching. They seemed to wonder what these humans were up to. It wasn't long before they found out.

The Indians made all the noise they cared to, and more. Mustangs seemed not to fear what they could see or hear. But the sudden slither of reptile or rodent, or the snap of a twig, might send them into frenzied bolting.

So the Indians followed, closer and closer, always with a continuous "Yip, yip, yip," and "shuh, shuh," and "Hoh! Hoh!—Hoh! Hoh!" Within three or four days they were able to walk among the herd, and all but touch the mustangs.

Now remained the task of bringing the five hundred wild horses to capture. A corral had been built. From the gate ran two long fences, gradually widening, funnel-like. Patiently, the Blackfeet herded the mustangs into these projecting wings. This was the system used by all canny mustangers, regardless of race.

Now began bedlam and cavorting to "blow" the animals into the corral. Too late "the Ghost" sensed the trap. Bellowing, he whirled, reared to a lofty height. Frantically he snarled orders to turn back. His hooves threshed air in an effort to stem the tide. But the surging herd swept wildly over

him. He scrambled to his feet, headed toward freedom. "The Ghost" was finally corralled.

But by that time four of the best Blackfoot warriors were dead.

In the corral "the Ghost" roared headlong toward his own subjects, his fellow horses. He mangled, killed. The Indians finally succeeded in cornering him with firebrands.

Three days were spent in breaking the five hundred. No warrior cared to tackle "the Ghost," however. On the fourth morning he was gone. Some blood, and skin, and steel-dust horse hair atop the corral told the tale. "The Ghost" had climbed the seven-foot fence.

On their way back to camp the Blackfeet came upon the bodies of eight wild horses. "The Ghost" was never captured again. The Indians believed that loss of his herd and his thwarted pride of leadership made a demon of him. His one purpose in life seemed to destroy all life which he found—and he did.

Yes, there were a few like "the Ghost" and *el Caballo Blanco*. Another was "Ghost of the Llano Estacado." When capture was at last certain, this stallion leapt from a thirty foot bluff to sink and die in a bog. But they were not all like that.

In 1867 there appeared in Kansas a pure ebony stallion who became known as Black Kettle. This horse earned the distinction of evading more mustangers than any four footed beast of the New World. Captain Homer W. Wheeler even used the U. S. Cavalry to capture Black Kettle.

However, one Frank M. Lockard established a ranch and horse dealing business a few years after Black Kettle gained renown in the West. To capture Black Kettle became an obsession with Lockard. He tried everything he *thought* he knew about mustanging, and, just like the cavalry, failed.

Lockard then began consulting men who knew the mustanging business. You see, Lockard was pretty much a novice. He called upon an authority known as "Wild Horse Johnson."

"They ain't nothin' to Black Kettle but mane an' tail," Johnson told Lockard. The horse when running seemed yards long, so said the mustangers. "A eight hundred pound hoss, no more," Johnson went on. "They's thousands o' good hosses runnin'

wild on the plains. I say leave Black Kettle alone!"

LOCKARD thought that over a moment. Then he said, "You just want Black Kettle for yourself, Johnson." Lockard's lips clamped. "But you won't get him—'cause I'm going to!"

And Lockard did get Black Kettle. By the time he corralled the mustang, Lockard suffered greatly from hunger and exposure. The contest was mainly that of stubborn ambition of man against stubborn resistance of beast. The man won. Lockard simply ran the unshod Black Kettle so footsore that the stallion could no longer go.

"Within two days after his capture," Lockard related, "Black Kettle was broke to the saddle. I had him gentle as a plow horse."

"Wild Horse Johnson" had been right about the stallion all along. He *was* nothing but mane and tail. Many mustangers who had tried for Black Kettle came to view him. They were greatly disappointed. For, meanwhile, Black Kettle had caught the Texas itch. His glorious hair was gone, never to grow back to its original magnificent proportions.

Lockard kept the mustang for some time, then sold him to Jesse S. Wright who needed a horse to pull his milk wagon. Later, the famous Black Kettle became a farm horse.

There were two outstandingly strange things about mustangs of North America when the pioneers came upon them. First was, as in Black Kettle's case, they were adapted to association with man without a great deal of difficulty once they were captured.

After centuries of a wild-running progeny they still maintained a sense of cooperation between man and horse.

Although the Indians preferred their mounts half wild, they proved that breaking mustangs was quite simple. A warrior would select the wild horse which was to be his. Four other braves held the animal with a rope. Waving his blanket, the warrior approached. "Hoh! Hoh! Shuh, shuh, shuh! Yip, yip! Hoh! Hoh!"

This usually went on for about fifteen minutes while the wild horse plunged in terror. At last, the mustang realized that no noise or motion the warrior made would harm him.

The warrior's toughest job was giving the horse his first touch. Finally, he succeeded in grasping the animal's nostrils, then rubbing them briskly. Thus the horse learned his master's scent. Roughness and gruffness was the only way to begin. After that, gentleness was the speediest way to win the mustang's affection.

Now, the warrior looped a rawhide string around the mustang's nose, carried this string up behind the ears and down under the other side of the nose loop. This made a sort of halter which tightened at the horse's slightest pull.

When tight, it seemed to cause an effect similar to that a human might experience when "cracking the crazy bone" of the elbow. Once this shoestring halter was fixed, the rope was removed from the mustang's neck.

The warrior was now on his own. He began to rub his hands over *every inch* of the animal's quivering body. The most ticklish part of this work—for the warrior—was doing the legs. A horse's hooves are his deadliest weapons.

Next came the task of getting the mustang used to the blanket on his back. Of course the horse tried to run from under it. Each time the mustang resisted anything, the warrior would give the halter a gentle jerk.

Then the warrior placed his elbows over the mustang's back, gradually pressing harder and harder. He pulled his body an inch off the ground, giving the horse his full weight.

Once the animal was trained to allow this, the warrior slowly raised and mounted. He sat a while, stroked the horse, talked to him soothingly. Finally, he urged the mount forward. The mustang staggered uncertainly at first, as if he had never tried to walk before.

Few horses broken in this manner ever tried to buck. And within a few hours became the willing and affectionate servants of their masters.

The second strange thing about our mus-

tangs were their ability to buck. No animal from Arabia or Europe or anywhere else can pitch like the American range-bred horse. One old peeler stated, "Any mustang which outgrows a hankerin' to elevate is guilty o' treason to the grand ol' State o' Texas!"

But one logical answer exists. Panthers—cougars—jaguars—mountain lions. This big cat has a peculiar mania for horse-flesh. His pet trick was to spring upon the mustang, dig one hind claw into the horse's muzzle, the other into the throat.

Hanging on with fore claws, the cat would twist, dig, and bite to strangle the horse or break his neck. Many mustangs were brought in with scars of combat upon them. The horse had but one possible method of dislodging the killer cat—to frantically pitch and buck with all his strength. Western horses, through heredity, used these same antics to unseat the men who rode them.

The mustang served his purpose. He gave the Westerner his means of transportation. He made possible the development of the most splendid horseman the world has ever known—the Comanche Indian. He was remarkable for speed and endurance. Should you dig deeply into the ancestry of some great horses of this day you would find they sprang from the mustang of the New World. Today, one traveling that long road between Reno and Salt Lake City might at any time stop until some lone mustang gallops out of his way. And on the ranges of Canada, mustangs are still hunted. By far, they are more numerous today than is the Texas longhorn, or the buffalo.

They roamed the plains and plateaus of North America in countless thousands. Before their coming, the peoples of this land never even dreamed that such an animal as the horse existed.

And how did they get here?

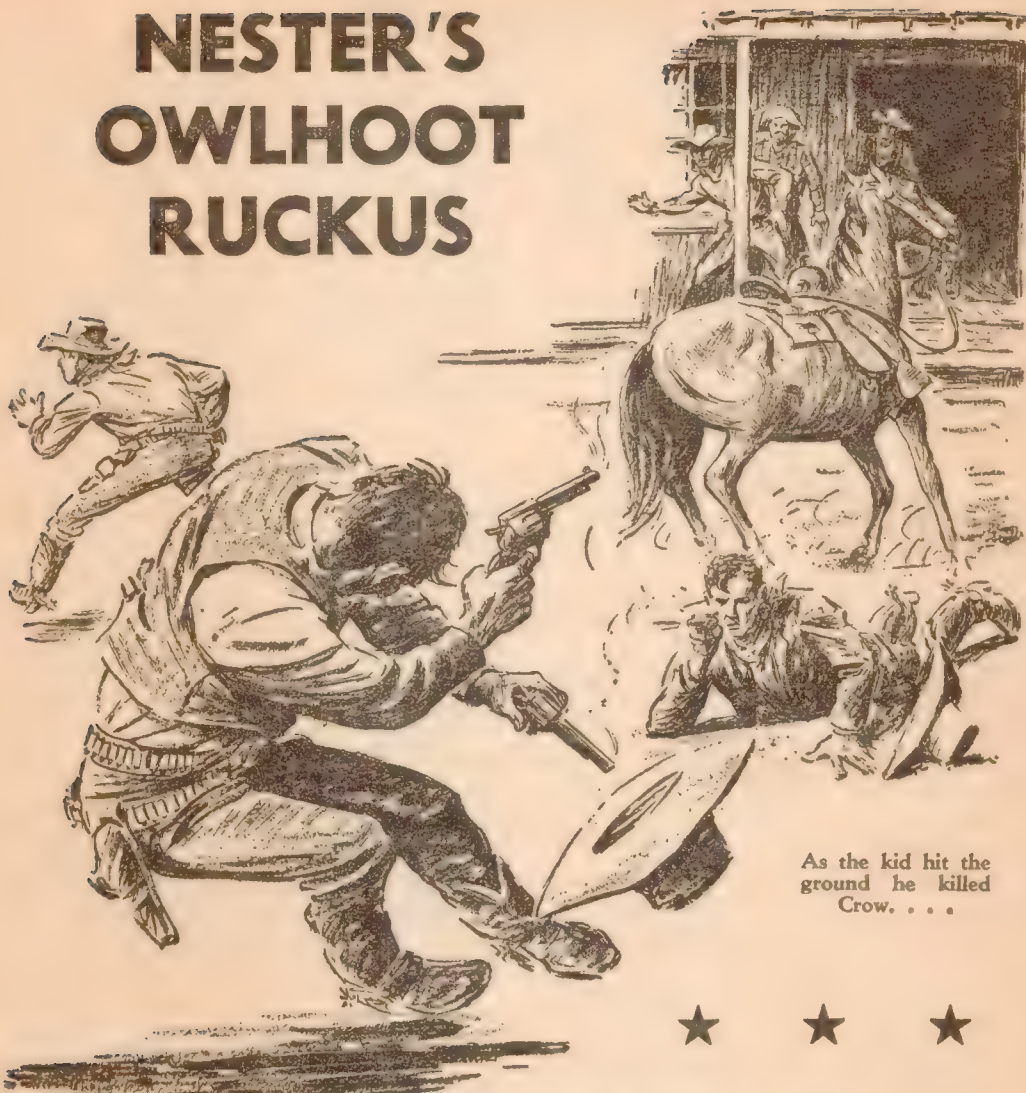
Don Hernando Cortes was first to bring horses to the New World. Never was a land more suited for equine progeny with its bountiful grass and sweetwater.

BRIEF LIFE

Arizona's first daily newspaper, *The Bulletin*, consisting of four three-column pages, was first published March 1, 1877. It boasted a direct wire service from San Diego via telegraph lines that stretched across the desert to Tucson. But *The Bulletin's* life was brief—29 days.

—JWQ

NESTER'S OWLHOOT RUCKUS



By **THOMAS THOMPSON**

While the Kid lived in lonely hatred, systematically robbing his mortal enemy—that enemy became richer every day.

THE box was different this trip. He could tell it the minute the driver threw it down and he heard it hit the ground. Otherwise, everything was the same. The grizzled old driver was shaking his head as if he couldn't believe it, and the shotgun guard was complaining about losing his gun.

He said, "Someday you're gonna be too slow, Kid."

The Kid grinned. "You always say that," he said.

The thin-faced passenger was tragic in his protests, and the Kid tried to console him. That was one thing he didn't like about it—the passengers. He had no quarrel with the passengers, whoever they were.

It was Quade Farrell's money he was after and nothing else. He hadn't been big enough to fight Quade Farrell honestly, so

he had chosen this way, but there was always a passenger or two. He winced. There had been a girl, one time. She had blue eyes like this thin faced man. He said, "Don't worry, Mister. I'll leave your stuff with the guard's gun. I always leave your gun for you, don't I guard?"

"Yeah, you always leave it for me," the guard admitted grudgingly. "Someday I'll hit you over the head with it."

The Kid said "Uh huh. Get moving. You know the rules."

"I ought to," the driver said. "You've told me often enough."

He stood there in the road then, watching the stage and the three disarmed men disappear around the bend in the road. He kicked the box with his booted toe and a queer vacant feeling knotted in his stomach.

The Kid was lonesome. It was like watching company leaving, seeing the stage disappear. He had come to like the driver and the guard, and he sometimes wished he could know them under different circumstances.

Have a drink with them, maybe— As always, he tried to get some satisfaction out of thinking that Quade Farrell was paying heavy for a dirty one thousand dollar deal he had pulled on a young Cuyamas Valley nester one time.

The Kid got off his horse and stooped down to examine the box. He had never seen one like it, and it worried him some. Quade Farrell's money was always in a regular express box, but this looked like a homemade outfit.

He was getting ready to open it when he heard the crash of gunfire from up the road. The Kid's hand swept toward his hip. There were two more shots, then a long stillness. The Kid dragged the box down toward a little creek and hid it under some brush. Then mounting his horse he started slowly up the road in the direction of the firing.

He rode cautiously, for it might be a trap. Quade Farrell was getting pretty cute lately, and that was good. Maybe it meant the shoe was beginning to pinch, and that is what the Kid had been after. He regretted the year of his life he had spent dodging like some wild thing, but if he could save one nester from one of Quade Farrell's doctored loans with its mysterious clause that changed from "ten per cent per year" to "ten per cent per month."

He pulled up sharply. The stage was standing there in the middle of the road and the thin faced passenger with the blue eyes was climbing into the driver's seat. He could see the body of the driver and the guard sprawled there in the boot. A thin trickle of blood was seeping down the side of the stage, making a dirty brown stain.

For a long time he sat there, afraid to move, then, sure that the killers, whoever they were, were gone, he spurred his pinto and rode down into the road in full view of the stage. The thin faced passenger dropped the lines and raised his hands. His eyes were wide and there was no color in his face. The Kid said, "Put 'em down, stranger, I had no part in this."

The passenger lowered his hands and picked up the lines again. His voice was shaky, but there was a lot of grit to it. A lot like the girl with the blue eyes, the Kid thought. "You'll have trouble proving it in court," the passenger said.

The Kid thought that over a moment. "I've never killed a man in my life," he said finally. Somehow it was important that this man believe him. "I steal from Quade Farrell and nobody else. Everybody knows that."

"So I've been told," the passenger said slowly. "I believed that once, but today when I told you it was my money in that box you took it anyway."

"You might have been paid to say that," the Kid said. There was a slow doubt growing in him and the sickening bitterness he felt as his eyes kept riveting on the dead men in the boot sent a surge of helpless rage through him. He said, "Who did it?"

The passenger's eyes were hard. "I'll talk to a jury, not a murderer," he said. He slapped the lines against the backs of the leaders and threw a pebble at the off wheeler. The stage lurched crazily, and as it started down the road the hand of the shotgun guard slipped down and dangled over the side.

THE Kid was down in the road, trying to make something out of the tracks there, when he looked up and saw the two riders bearing down on him. He made a dive for his horse and was in his saddle when the first slug caught him in the shoulder and knocked him down on his horse's neck. He jabbed his spurs into the

startled pinto and headed straight into the brush.

After that it was a pain crazed hell of brush and hot lead as the two riders stuck to his trail like a couple of blood hounds. He knew every draw and canyon in the mountains, but handicapped by his wound he could not move fast enough to dodge them.

Once he trapped himself against a solid ledge of granite, and he had to make a stand. His shoulder was beginning to swell and his shirt was tight against it. Ripping his handkerchief with his teeth, he made a crude pad that stopped the flow of blood. Then he drew his gun and started firing at the two figures that taken places in the brush there below him.

He emptied his gun and knew that he hadn't hit them, and as he stooped over to reload, holding his gun between his knees, they got his range again and the chipped granite stung his cheek and sent tiny curls of pungent smoke into the still air. He couldn't see them very well, but of one thing he was sure.

These were the men who had killed the stage driver and the guard. They must be, or they wouldn't be so anxious to have him out of the way. If they were law men they would have sneaked up on him and captured him. They had plenty of chance. He poured four shots into the clump of sumac and saw the two men break for new cover.

The Kid couldn't tell much about the men except that one was short and squat and the other was crow like in the way he hopped around. The narrowness of his face and the beak like quality of his nose heightened his resemblance of the bird.

The Kid mentally nicknamed them Shorty and The Crow, and his grey eyes caught every move they made. If he ever saw them again he would know them—. They had spotted him again and one bullet ripped a hole through his jacket. It was getting too hot here. He'd have to make another run for it.

He worked his way down the side of the ledge and got back on his horse. The shoulder was raising Cain now, and at times the Kid felt dizzy and sick to his stomach. He gritted his teeth, jabbed home his spurs, and, riding low in the saddle, made a break across the flat space toward the shelter of oaks there in the canyon.

His move had been sudden enough that

the two killers had been caught off guard, but they soon saw his plan and were after him. He knew now that he could keep out of their way, but he was being forced closer and closer to the town of Kingsburg, and Kingsburg meant the law.

He tried to circle back, but they closed in and drove him on. He thought of rabbit drives he had seen where the rabbits were forced into an ever narrowing wedge and finally into a pen. . . . Over his shoulder he could see the scattered lights of the town.

They got his horse right out near the grove of cottonwoods that rimmed the creek just where it made the big bend before going under the bridge into town. The Kid felt it coming in the way the pinto lurched, and he managed to kick his feet free of the stirrups. But the sudden stumble unseated him, and he went over the animal's head and landed on his wounded shoulder.

For what seemed hours he lay there, the pain making crazy patterns of black and white in front of his tightly closed eyes. Then he started crawling slowly, expecting every minute to get a slug in the back of his head. But it didn't happen, and he came to a board fence and hid himself in the tall grass that grew there.

The thoughts of his danger seemed to pass and wild dreams raced through his mind. He kept remembering the girl passenger with the blue eyes; and the thin faced man today, and the way he had driven off down the road with the dead driver and the guard. Then there was the girl again and he was reliving the night he had taken her things and left them in a neat package along with the guard's gun.

He had addressed the package to "the girl with the lovely blue eyes" and he had added ten dollars and included a note saying he was sorry and saying that he robbed only Quade Farrell. Quade Farrell chased her from his delirious mind and he saw Farrell bloated and smug—saw him foreclosing on a little place in Cuyamas Valley. A little place that was going to be home once, a long long time ago. It was only a year, really. He awakened suddenly, the pain and stiffness in his shoulder jerking him back to consciousness.

He felt better. His mouth was dry and hot, but his mind was clear. He couldn't move his shoulder and there were sharp stabs of pain, but he could think all right

and he got to his feet and started moving along the fence, keeping his head down.

It seemed strange that the two killers hadn't followed through. They could have walked up on him and finished him. He figured that they had been scared off by being so close to town. He'd find them someday. Shorty and The Crow.

He came to a sign on the new fence and near by there was a double row of stakes. That would be the future road bed of the new spur that was coming into Kingsburg from the main line. He stopped to read the sign and was suddenly sick. It said, QUADE FARRELL STOCK YARDS, but to the Kid it meant a lot more than that. It meant that Quade Farrell must have taken over the entire Cuyamas Valley, for his ranch alone would not be big enough to supply cattle to a yard like this and there were no other cattle ranches within fifty miles.

SO HE had failed. His one man war against Quade Farrell had been a waste of time. His year of hiding out like a coyote with no one to talk to except a stage driver and a guard who wanted to kill him—all that was wasted. He didn't care much anymore if someone saw him. He straightened up and started walking down the road toward town.

The moon came up, round and full, and the yellow light transformed the dinginess of the town into houses of alabaster and streets of silver. The pass into Cuyamas Valley became a bold relief of light and shadow, standing out as if to mock the Kid about his memories of the past— He stopped suddenly. There was a new road leading over the shoulder of the hill toward the pass.

The ridges made by the scrapers were visible and the new cuts were sharp in the red earth. Right at the edge of the pass a clutter of equipment marked the end of the still incompleted road. The Kid bit his lip. He knew better than anyone else, perhaps, what a road to the Valley meant. That had been part of his dream—a road to the Valley, and someday, he had thought, there would be a spur track in from the main line so a man could ship his produce.

Quade Farrell was doing all right, and while he did things the self styled Kid hid out like a coyote bitter with hate, brewing up a bait of hemp tea for himself. He knew

now that he had been wrong. He should have killed Quade Farrell that day when he came out to take over the little place at the head of the valley. Killed him and hung for it. He'd hang now anyway. His pace quickened. That was it. He'd hang anyway. Why not hang with the satisfaction of knowing that he had done some good in the world?

He stepped boldly out into the street and headed toward where he remembered Quade Farrell's house stood. Then he stopped short, the wind whooshing out of his lungs as if he had been hit. Coming down the street was Quade Farrell. Tagging along like a couple of admiring pups was Shorty and The Crow. The Crow packed two guns, and there was a marshal shield on his vest. It was polished and new.

The Kid let his hand drop to his gun and he grasped the butt firmly. Why kid himself? He was hurt and he was no gun artist anyway. That marshal looked like he might be. He hadn't planned on making a wholesale sweep of it this way, but it satisfied him.

One of these men had needed killing for a long time and the other two were murderers. They were within twenty-five feet of him now, right at the corner. The Kid drew his gun. The three men turned the corner and headed up the slope toward the school house on the hill.

For the first time the Kid noticed that everyone in town seemed to be doing the same thing. He put his gun back in its holster and he felt the sweat pop out on his forehead and stream down his face.

Then he started following Quade Farrell, Shorty, and The Crow up the hill toward the school house. Like in a daze he covered his wounded shoulder with his blood stained coat and slipped in behind them, keeping his back to the wall so no one would notice.

THE meeting hall was jammed. Most of the men were farmers, and the Kid caught himself wishing he were one of them. The rest of the men looked like a bunch of imported workers, but he didn't have much chance to think about it.

On the little platform at the front of the room was the thin man who had been the only passenger on the stage that afternoon. Next to him stood the girl. The Kid hadn't forgotten her. She was the girl with the lovely blue eyes. He saw now how strong

the resemblance was between them, and he knew that this man must be the girl's father.

There was little order in the meeting, but from the shouting of the men he soon gathered that the workers were the ones building the road into the valley and the thin man—Trent McKinzie, they called him—was the one who had hired them. The argument was that McKinzie couldn't pay them because the payroll had been taken from the stage by the Kid.

The Kid felt unclean as he caught the eyes of the girl watching him closely. He tried to sink back further in the crowd. The Crow was on his feet, waving for silence now, and the crowd gave it to him.

"I promise you I'll have the Kid on a limb," the marshal blustered. "Meanwhile I been talking things over with Mr. Farrell and he's got a few words to say to you. Keep quiet and listen to what he has to say." He sat down heavily and Quade Farrell got to his feet and walked slowly up to the front of the room.

Farrell was impressive in his well tailored clothes, and the way he kept twirling his watch chain gave him an air of ease and well being. He looked from side to side as he strolled up the aisle, and he called most men by their first name. He had called the Kid by his first name once. The day he had made it so easy for the Kid to borrow a thousand dollars. The Kid shifted uneasily. The girl was still watching him closely.

Farrell didn't waste much time. He told the farmers what a great thing it was for Kingsburg—having this road into the valley. He told them how smart they were planting orchards and developing the grain land, and he told them how they were the pioneers—the builders of a nation. They applauded loudly and the tension left the meeting.

And as soon as the tension left he told them how he would loan them the money—making a joke out of the fact that love is love and business is business and how he wouldn't loan money to his own brother without security. They all laughed at that, and the road builders grinned and nodded to each other as they saw signs of getting their pay.

It all made the Kid a little sick. Farrell hadn't changed, and neither had his victims. It was just on a grander scale. The girl

was whispering to Trent McKinzie and McKinzie's keen blue eyes had focused on the Kid. He saw McKinzie step over and speak to Quade Farrell and there was a sudden tension near the front of the room. Stepping back quickly the Kid walked out into the night and ran toward town.

Four men came out of the meeting hall and were framed in the doorway. He saw that Shorty and The Crow were two of them and realizing that pursuit was forming he took the first horse he came to, threw himself into the saddle and thundered down the street. There was a wild commotion at the meeting house as the name of the Kid spread through the assemblage and there were a few shots in his general direction.

Once maybe the Kid would have laughed at the ease with which he lost his pursuers, but tonight it was all hollow mockery. He kept thinking of the year he had wasted trying to break Farrell, while all the time Farrell was getting stronger.

He thought of the Cuyamas Valley and the little place he had had there at the foot of the pass. It belonged to Quade Farrell now, and in a few months the entire valley would belong to Farrell. He thought of these things, but most of all he thought of the look in the girl's eyes and the fear there as she had whispered his name.

He was a killer now. That's what the girl with the blue eyes had been thinking. They were calling him a murderer, and they always would. He'd hide out for the rest of his life, and while he hid out Quade Farrell would loan money to the farmers and he would foreclose and he would own the valley. And it had all started out to be a dream. Even this revenge he had planned.

At the time it had seemed foolproof. He had been so blinded by his own loss and disappointment that he had neglected to think of others who would come after him. Farrell would loan the money and the girl would always think of the Kid as a murderer.

And suddenly the Kid started thinking along a different line. He could hear Shorty and The Crow crashing around out there in the brush someplace. They didn't bother him much, for he knew that he could stay hidden from them for the rest of his life if need be. But he began to wonder what a life like that was worth, and he tried to put a dollar and cents value on it. The pain in his shoulder had started up again and there

was a throb-like drumming in his ears.

He had the pay roll money. That must amount to quite a bit. But he couldn't spend it, and if he could he wouldn't. Knowing that it was not Farrell's money made it loathsome to him.

How much was his life worth, then? He decided it was worth nothing, and with that decision came an idea. He started working his way slowly through the brush back toward the creek that ran along the stage road.

IT WAS almost morning when he got to the place and dragged out the box that held the pay roll. He picked it up and set it on a rock that was just the height of his horse's back. Then mounting again, he rode close and took the box in his right hand and headed back down the trail toward Kingsburg.

Every step of the horse sent a thump of pain through his shoulder and his mind seemed to wander from one subject to another. But it always came back to one master plan. He would drop the box and reach for his gun. He'd try for Shorty and the Crow, because they had killed and would have to die.

Then if there was time he'd get Quade Farrell. If he could live long enough he could have the last laugh. If he lived too long he would have to do his laughing from the end of a rope.

He loitered out around the edge of town, keeping himself well hidden in a thicket, until he saw the farmers heading toward Quade Farrell's office. Then he rode slowly down the street, not looking to right or left. He was near Farrell's office before anyone recognized him, then he heard a startled yell. He kept going, but the muscles in his back bunched against the shock of lead he felt would come any time.

Trent McKinzie was there, but he was glad to see that the girl was not. He wouldn't want her to see this. He rode straight to McKinzie. Lifting the box slightly, he managed to get ahold of the reins that were looped around the saddle horn and he pulled the horse to a stop.

Then he dropped the box. It slid to the ground with a thud, and the horse shied abruptly. "There's your payroll, Mr. McKinzie," the Kid said. "I'm glad now I took it. If I hadn't Quade Farrell would of had it."

There was a commotion at the back of the crowd. He could see Shorty and the Crow angling across the street. From up the other direction his eye caught sight of the girl. She hurried up to the side of her father.

The Kid could see those wide blue eyes looking up at him, and he could see the color drain from her face. He knew that he had about two seconds to live, but it became important to him to use that time to clear himself of murder.

"I didn't kill the stage driver and the guard," he said bluntly. "Mr. McKinzie can tell you that." His eyes had captured those of the girl and he held them. "I didn't have anything to do with it." He waited while the crowd tensed. Then he half turned in his saddle and pointed to Shorty and the Crow who were just making their way through the inner circle of men. "It was those two there," the Kid said, "and I never saw them before today, but I'll bet my last breath they work for Quade Farrell!"

The startling simplicity of his accusation held the crowd for a minute, and the Kid's gun did the rest. But he couldn't hold them off for long. The Crow had started to edge back to get behind him. The Kid could have shot him, but the blue eyes of the girl seemed to burn into his flesh and hold him back. He could see her whispering to Trent McKinzie. McKinzie had pulled back his coat to expose a gun. Every eye turned on him when he spoke.

"The man who killed the driver was short and stocky," McKinzie said softly. He had lifted the gun from his belt and was holding it loosely at his side. "The other one had a prominent nose. They both wore bandanas across their faces but one had a prominent nose that made his mask stick out away from his face." His words were lost to everyone except those nearest him, for there was a quick rumble of voices as every eye turned on Shorty and the Crow. Quade Farrell was yelling a protest. His voice was high pitched and his face was shiny with perspiration. The Kid felt a sudden thrill running through him. He leaned forward in his saddle.

"What were you going to do, Farrell—change that interest clause to 'per month' instead of 'per year' like you did with me?" He saw the sudden movement of the Crow's hand and he ducked to one side.

The Crow cut loose with both his guns. One slug caught the Kid high in the back and knocked him out of the saddle. As he hit the ground he killed the Crow. Shorty decided not to buy into this game, and turned tail. Lead was whining around everywhere, and the farmers were milling and dashing for cover like a bunch of stampeded steers. The Kid forced himself to his feet. He didn't seem to have any feeling in his hands or legs, but he could still see the girl, and he went to her and stood in front of her while he lined his sights on Quade Farrell who was trying to get back into his own office.

"Turn around, Farrell," the Kid called, slamming a shot into the door jamb near Farrell's head. "I want to look at you when you die!"

Quade Farrell turned with a snarl, his gun spurting fire. The Kid had never been so calm in his life. It seemed almost as if there were a dead silence, and the bullet that raced across his ribs felt more like the slap of an open hand than the cut of hot lead.

He deliberately lined his sights on Quade Farrell and squeezed the trigger. And that was all. He remembered thinking it was better to die like this than on the end of a rope, and he could feel himself grinning.

THE Kid was glad when he realized that he was still alive. He knew he was in jail, but the bed was soft and the girl was standing there near him. Trent McKinzie was leaning in the open cell door.

"This was the only place we had to put you," the girl said. There was apology in her voice. Her father turned quickly and hurried over to the bed of the Kid.

"That's not so," he said, his voice tight in his throat. "You talked more sense while you were out than you ever did when you were awake. We got a court order to make a check of Farrell's papers and found that you were right about him altering interest charges and amounts. Then a jury tried

you and found you guilty of highway robbery." He coughed nervously.

The Kid was still glad he was alive. As long as the girl would stay here it would be heaven. After she left— Well, he could have his memories. And even in a jail cell it would be something knowing that his old dream of Cuyamas Valley was coming true for someone. He thought he detected a twinkle in the eyes of the girl and her father.

"The jury sentenced you to thirty days," Trent McKinzie said, trying to keep his voice under control. "I guess by the time you're well your time will be up—" His face broke into a broad grin and he came over and laid his hand on the Kid's arm. "Good luck, Kid," he said then. "We're giving you back your place there at the foot of the pass—"

The Kid's eyes began to burn and his throat hurt worse than his shoulder. He looked from the girl to her father and blurted, "Don't call me Kid. My name is Bill." The sound of it startled him, and he repeated to himself, "*Bill Dye*." It seemed almost as if he had forgotten his own name until this moment. The girl was smiling.

"As long as you're wiping the slate," she said, her eyes bright, "do you remember the package with my money you left for me?"

The Kid could feel the color crawling into his cheeks and the palms of his hands became moist and uncomfortable. Right then he wished to the devil he were out there in the valley. But at the same time he wished she were out there with him.

"I owe you ten dollars," she said, still teasing him with her eyes. "You gave me too much." She leaned over then and whispered so her father couldn't hear her. "And do you really think I have lovely blue eyes?" she said.

The Kid didn't answer. He couldn't. But he kept thinking about what an awful lot of conversation that question could open up when things got normal again.

STATEROOM SAVVY

The fact that rooms aboard ships are commonly known as staterooms is due to one of the customs of the operators of the old river steamboats. The rooms aboard those picturesque paddle-wheelers were usually given the names of the various states of the Union. Hence—stateroom.

—JWQ

TOY-PISTOL BANDIT

*How Gentleman Bill became the West's
most audacious robber.*



By
**JHAN
ROBBINS**

He realized his error when the gun-butt caught him in the chin. . . .

THE overland Express between Cheyenne and Denver had gathered speed and the rocky landscape was fleeting past the sooty window when the thought struck Bill Carlisle.

"Oh, rats!" he said mildly to himself, as befitted a Sunday School teacher. He started up from his green plush seat as though to leave the train, but he settled down again as he saw the last of Cheyenne disappear in the distance.

Rebuking himself, he remembered the earnest promise that young Corky McGee had extracted. "I'll bring your present from Denver," he had sworn solemnly, and the kid had let him go. Now he had forgotten to buy it.

The present was a reckless and unconventional device to which Carlisle had resorted to get 10 year old Corky McGee to learn his Sunday School text. As instructor of morals, he had felt somewhat uncomfortable about it; after all, a bribe was a bribe. But it had worked beautifully. Spurred by pure greed, Corky McGee could rattle off his weekly lesson like a gramophone. Now he would probably boycott Sunday School altogether.

Carlisle's guilty remorse quaked into hope as the Express slowed down at a tiny way station. This was the Borle cutoff, where the train took on an extra engine to help it climb the steep Sherman grade. And there, at the end of the platform, was a small trading store, handily located at the edge of the tracks.

No one noticed the erect, thin-shanked man in the black cloth suit as he swung off the shunting train and raced into the miner's trading post. He glanced rapidly over the sparsely stocked shelves. Red woolen underwear, picks and shovels, flour. Not much there to appeal to a kid.

But when he reached the candy counter, he found what he wanted. Little round, colored candy balls stuffed into glass containers that were blown to represent familiar objects—a train, a dog, a stagecoach, all in realistic miniature. He hesitated over the choice.

The whistle of the train outside blew, long and warningly, and he heard the thump of the water barrels on the platform. Hurriedly he selected a candy-filled glass sixgun, flung down a green bill and dashed outside. The train was moving slowly up the grade and it was only with a spurt of speed that he reached the caboose and leaped aboard.

The swift mountain dusk had fallen while the train paused, and it was almost dark inside the car. The conductor who saw the strange man spring suddenly from the shadows with a gun in his hand, pushed his own arms toward the roof and quavered, "Don't shoot!"

That was how "Gentleman Bill" Carlisle became the West's most audacious train robber. It was so easy, it seemed almost fore-ordained. The train, with its wealthy, jewel-laden passengers, fell into his lap like a wind blown apple. He couldn't resist the opportunity.

Shoving the glass toy into the conductor's back, he ordered, "Keep moving!" and the trainman shuffled forward. Carlisle forced him to walk through the long string of cars holding his hat for a catch-basin. Into this, passengers were politely asked to drop their valuables.

It was a rich haul. There were dozens of heavy gold watches of the turnip variety, five diamond brooches, a handful of jeweled rings and nearly two thousand dollars in cash. But with every step forward through the swaying train, Carlisle felt his throat tighten with fear.

As he neared the engine he was almost voiceless, speaking in a low whisper. The lights were brighter up front, and he was mortally afraid that some sharp-eyed victim on the train would spot his fraudulent weapon.

One woman did. She was a slender red-

head with big violet eyes, he recalled, and spoke to him in a trembling voice. She made no move toward the overflowing hat when he and the unhappy conductor reached her seat, and the rapidly evolving bandit made what he thought was an impatient, professional gesture with the glass pistol.

"I—I—please, Sir, I have no jewels at all, and no money," she murmured.

Bill Carlisle's sense of justice was outraged. "What!" he barked, "a beautiful girl without even a diamond ring? What kind of a woman are you?"

She lowered her tear-filled eyes and answered, "Please, Sir, I teach Sunday School."

At this admission, Carlisle found her poverty so understandable that he scooped up a fistful of sparkling gewgaws and dumped them in her lap, together with a sizable amount of cash. As he bent, he struck the toy gun against an iron bolt on her seat.

He felt the weapon break in his hand; splinters drove into his palm. A shower of candy and glass poured into the girl's lap. She stared unbelievably, then her shoulders began to shake with laughter. But her back still shielded him from the view of the other passengers. He dodged hurriedly for the door and dived out into the mountain night.

FOR a month, the railroad officials were the laughing stock of the frontier. Two hundred passengers and a passel of trainmen held up and robbed of everything but their winter flannels by a man with a glass pistol! Bill Carlisle, footloose in the Colorado hills, joined in the general laughter.

He was highly enthused by his own daring, and richer than he had ever hoped to be. Besides, the die was cast. He couldn't go back to the Sunday School—he didn't have a present for Corky McGee.

Word went around that the glass gun bandit was hiding in Telegraph Canyon between Laramie and Cheyenne. The hills and trails between the cities bristled with armed men like steel porcupines.

Two posses lay ambushed at Old Tie Sid-ing and Cheyenne Pass; the area was corked up tight. Carlisle coolly strolled into Laramie, bought a berth on a train south-bound to Denver, and an hour later rode rapidly past the armed guards patrolling the track.

Carlisle was tremendously amused—so much so that he sat down and wrote a

taunting letter to a Denver newspaper and a sedate note of thanks to the head of the railroad. Then he started the law on a merry chase by peppering the offices of the Sheriffs in Denver and Laramie with a flood of advice.

One note read "Come and get me, I'm at 110 Bank street, Bill Carlisle." Tearing out to the address mentioned, the sheriff found it was the home of an elderly and respected judge. The other taunts and tips were equally humiliating.

Meanwhile, as the hue and cry died down, Carlisle was living in another section of Denver, having a high time with his stolen wealth. He threw parties on a massive scale, bought a piano and played it beautifully, and gave free dinners to destitute gold miners.

When these pastimes palled, he addressed another letter to the Denver News and announced that on the 13th of June, 1889, at six o'clock he would hold up a train at Greeley, Colorado. The paper published the letter on its front page and the railroad decided to act on his information.

The evening train that pulled into Greeley on June 13th was a traveling arsenal. Guards rode on top of the cars, sat perched on the cow catcher before the engine, and patrolled the aisles. Outraged, squaking passengers were seized and searched for hidden weapons. The contents of the baggage cars were shaken out and combed.

No one ever knew how Bill Carlisle got aboard, but he suddenly rose from a seat in one of the day coaches. The train detective in the chair beside him realized who he was the moment he saw the impudent bandit's menacing gesture, but he laughed imprudently at the gun in his hand.

"You don't catch me falling for no toy pistol!" he chuckled, reaching for his own weapon. He realized his error as the butt of Carlisle's .44 caught him across the chin. He knew what his next move had to be. Reluctantly he reached for his hat and held it out before him. Then the two began the familiar shuffle through the train.

The take this time was small in cash value, consisting of 32 rifles, 53 small arms and half a dozen short clubs. The glass pistol bandit did not attempt to take his booty with him, but it was a signal triumph just the same.

The fury of the armed forces of the states of Wyoming and Colorado knew no bounds. Egged on by the railroad, they sent nearly 300 men into the sagebrush to find Bill Carlisle. Bloodhounds were called in and Indian trackers used. But only his dwindling food supplies drove him out of his haystack hiding place.

In Rawlins Penitentiary the ex-Sunday School teacher was a model prisoner. Sentenced to ten years, he advanced shortly to the status of trusty and was sent to a nearby shirt factory to earn his keep. A week later, he went out of the factory in a huge cardboard box, covered with a pile of freshly-stitched overalls.

A detachment of U. S. Cavalry joined the chase. The country was scoured, but the Wyoming bandit had disappeared. He would have remained a free man, but he could not resist the temptation of bedeviling the railroad.

He held up and robbed the Coastbound Limited between Medicine Bow and Rock River, then stepped into a nearby telegraph office at Glendo, Wyoming and sent this cryptic message to the head of the railroad: "Thanks for the haul on your limited."

The chase ended there. The telegraph operator recognized him, sent off a call for troops instead of the message the bandit requested. He returned to Rawlins under a life sentence. His personal popularity was not diminished at the prison.

For five years, he answered daily fan mail that carried proposals, business propositions and admiring questions. When one small lad wrote eagerly, "Dear Mr. Glass Gun Bandit, How many men have you killed?" he answered seriously, "I've never fired a gun in my life. I am a teacher of the Gospel and couldn't hit a barn door from twenty feet away."





By
JOSEPH W. QUINN

HOLIDAY FOR A TINHORN

*Gambler Rufus Shark was
branded a thief—while a
welshing tinhorn collected
a fat reward.*



IN HIS cabin aboard the palatial Mississippi paddle-wheeler, *Belle of Orleans*, Rufus Shark watched Phillip Slickson get up from the table.

Slickson, tall, sleek, dark, rested his weight on his hands on the back of the chair, regarded Shark coldly. "You're almighty lucky at blackjack," he declared flatly. "Almighty lucky."

The veteran river-boat gambler shrugged, thumbed back the rigid brim of his tall, cylindrical beaver hat.

Slickson tongued his lips, watched Shark heft the green jade cameo in his palm. The diamond chips around its gold mounting glittered with icy fire. Slickson started to say something, stopped, turned and went out.

Shark puckered his lips thoughtfully, regarded the cameo in his hand. After Slickson had run out of money, he'd produced

the cameo, asked a thousand for it. The thousand had come back to Shark—fast.

Slickson was upset about the loss of the cameo. He had the look of a man who had made a bad mistake and didn't know what to do about it.

"Cute little item," Shark mused, dropping it into the pocket of his brown cut-away coat. He gathered up the currency on the table, stuffed the bills into his wallet, then made his way to the barroom and a try at some Napoleon brandy.

In the barroom Shark gave brief glance to his silent partner, "Bamboo" Johnson. Bamboo was napping in nearby club chair, mouth gaping, snoring sonorously.

Shark was sipping his third glass of brandy when he glimpsed the portly, blue-and-brass-clad figure of Captain Horn in the doorway. The burly first mate hard by the captain's elbow.

"Here comes trouble," Shark murmured, finishing the brandy at a single swig.

Close in the captain's wake waddled the even more portly figure of Mrs. Jane Jay Buxton, society heavy-weight and owner of a huge sugar plantation down-river. She too wore a foreboding look.

Slickson's dark-clad figure brought up the rear of the quartet. The four halted in a semi-circle around Shark at the bar. Mrs. Buxton's high piping voice opened the pot.

"Give it to me," she extended her hand, palm up. "Give me my cameo you—you cheap thief!"

"Just a moment," Captain Horn interposed, raising a pudgy hand. "I think you'd best let me handle this." The captain turned toward Shark. "Mrs. Buxton was taking a valuable jade cameo to St. Louis as a wedding gift for her niece. She has reported it stolen, offered a four-hundred dollar reward."

Shark dipped hand in coat pocket, showed the cameo in his palm. "Is this it?"

"It most certainly is," Mrs. Buxton declared. She shot out her arm, snatched the cameo off Shark's palm.

"So, you did steal it," the captain's booming voice was edged with joy. "Mr. Slickson was right, after all."

"You're dealing from the wrong deck," Shark stated flatly. "I won that cameo from Slickson in my cabin just a short while ago. He wasn't very lucky at blackjack."

Slickson laughed harshly. His face was set, composed, his black eyes hard and untroubled. "Nonsense," he said evenly. "This man's a quick thinker. I never played blackjack in my life. What's more I haven't set foot inside anyone's cabin but my own."

SHARK found himself admiring the man's brazen front, his convincing manner. Slickson had stolen the cameo, realized he'd made a bad mistake in producing it in the blackjack game. To cover himself Slickson had tipped off the captain and Mrs. Buxton that Shark had the cameo—and had claimed the reward to boot.

"How," Shark asked Slickson, "did you explain that you knew I had Mrs. Buxton's cameo?"

"I saw you giving it the once-over as

you entered your cabin. It's only a few doors from mine. You didn't know you were observed."

Shark nodded grimly. Slickson was playing a pat hand and no mistakes.

Mrs. Buxton fumbled with bills, stuffed them into Slickson's hand. "Thank you, young man. You've done me an invaluable service."

Captain Horn put in hopefully: "You'll press charges when we reach St. Louis, of course."

"Indeed I will!" she shot Shark a baleful glare, then turned and waddled away, the brim of straw hat flouncing like a bird flapping its wings.

Shark regarded Slickson stonily. "Cute, Slickson. Very cute."

A faint smirk played on Slickson's thin lips. He seemed mighty satisfied with himself. Shark restrained an impulse to wipe that trace of a smirk away with a fistful of knuckles. He said flatly: "I'm dealing the next hand."

Slickson shrugged, walked casually away.

The captain told Shark: "You're not dealing *any* hands from now on—unless it's to yourself in the brig." He jerked his head at the burly first mate. "Lock him up."

"Just a minute, gentlemen," Shark clipped. "Let me remind you, Captain, that so far, it's my word against Slickson's. If you imprison me falsely—well, there's the courts, you know."

The captain thought about that for a moment. "Very well," he said finally. "You have the freedom of the boat. But you'll have to report to me at least an hour before we dock at St. Louis. Otherwise I'll have the crew scour the boat for you. And you'll find the going pretty rough when they find you." He smiled smugly.

When the captain and mate had gone Shark ordered a double brandy. Then he crossed the room to where Bamboo Johnson napped, roused his silent partner, spoke to him briefly. Bamboo nodded. Shark turned, strode out of the barroom, found the chambermaid who took care of the ladies' cabins. A bill and a few glib words got him a key. A few minutes later, after some ignobly furtive slinking, he let himself into Mrs. Buxton's cabin.

It took him ten minutes to find the cameo—between pillow and pillow-case. He paused at the door to glance over the dis-

order he'd created—drawers open, all sorts of female finery, including several corsets, scattered about. Furtively, he stepped out into the hall, moved quickly down its carpeted length. This was one of the times in his career when he was gambling on sheer luck. He got out of the ladies' section of the boat unobserved.

In his own cabin Shark stretched out on the bed. He'd dealt. All that remained was to wait for the play. Shark dozed.

Presently a heavy fist thundered on the cabin door. Captain Horn's deep voice boomed: "Open up in there!" The door-knob rattled.

Shark smiled, got up. Play had started. He opened the door.

Captain Horn barged in, the mate at his heels. "Mrs. Buxton's cabin has been looted. Her cameo's been stolen again. I see now why you talked me out of holing you up in the brig."

"So as I'd be free for a second try at stealing her cameo," Shark finished for him. "You're mighty anxious to pin this on me, Captain. Did you ever think that *my* story might have been straight dealing, and that it's friend Slickson who's got her cameo?"

"Nonsense!"

"I've got three hundred says it is sense. You're a sporting man, Captain. . . ."

"You're on. This is one time I win from you."

"Let's pick up Mrs. Buxton and pay friend Slickson a visit."

THEY found Mrs. Buxton pacing up and down in front of a palm in the salon. "You," she stormed at Shark. "You've robbed me again!"

Shark said quietly. "The man you paid the reward to robbed you. Slickson has your cameo right now."

"Bah!" Mrs. Buxton snorted. "You're determined to throw your own guilt onto that nice young man."

Captain Horn edged forward. "He's bet me three hundred he can prove Slickson has your cameo. He's bluffing, Ma'am—and I'm calling. . . . Play your cards, Shark."

"I think," Shark said evenly, "that I saw Slickson entering Mr.—er—Mr. Johnson's cabin." He led the way to Bamboo Johnson's cabin, halted outside the door, raised a hand for quiet. Bamboo's voice drifted

out through the open ventilation louvres near the top of the door, "Your luck at blackjack's kind of poor."

"Almighty poor. But it will change," came clipped answer.

Shark breathed easier. He hadn't been too sure Bamboo would succeed in getting Slickson into a game in his cabin.

Shark peered into the room through the open louvres, stepped back, gestured to Mrs. Buxton and Captain Horn to have a look. Mrs. Buxton looked, stepped back, frowning thoughtfully. The captain looked briefly, clucked. Shark turned the knob, pushed into the room, followed by Mrs. Buxton and the captain.

"Sorry to bust in on you like this," Shark said easily.

"Is there something wrong?" Bamboo Johnson said around the Pittsburg stogie clamped in yellowed teeth.

"My cameo's been stolen again!" Mrs. Buxton declared.

The captain explained: "Shark claims you have it, Slickson."

"Thought you never played blackjack, Slickson," Shark sent his gaze to the cards on the small table. There were two solitary five dollar bills in front of Slickson. Bamboo was idly fingering the large stack of bills at his place.

"His luck's been all bad," Bamboo shook his head. "He's practically broke."

Slickson's hard black eyes regarded Shark coldly through the smoke drifting up from the cigar in his mouth. He sat motionless, elbows propped on the table. He straightened then, his arm brushing his tall, black cylindrical hat, which he'd placed crown down on the table. He hooked thumbs in vest pockets, leaned back, said easily: "All right, so I play blackjack. That doesn't prove I stole Mrs. Buxton's cameo."

"You stole that cameo," Shark said evenly. "The first time you lost it to me at blackjack. To cover up you cooked up a nice tight story to prove I did it—and collected a reward in addition. You then stole it again."

"All right, smart guy, prove it." Slickson challenged derisively.

Shark opened his wallet, counted out three hundred-dollar bills, dropped them on the table. "Our bet, Captain," he reminded.

Captain Horn dropped a sheaf of bills on top of Shark's money.

Slickson said: "That's the easiest three hundred you ever made, Captain." He swung his gaze to Shark. "Now then, just how are you going to prove I have the cameo?"

"Submit to search?"

"Certainly." Slickson stood up with alacrity, lifted his arms scarecrow fashion.

"Go to it, Captain," Shark gestured.

Captain Horn stepped forward, shoved his hands into Slickson's pockets, patted his clothing. He turned finally, grinning. "He hasn't got it."

"Maybe you'd like to see for yourself," Slickson taunted.

Shark shook his head. "No," he said easily.

Slickson picked up his two five-dollar bills, stowed them in his vest pocket. "That was a silly bluff, Shark," he said, reaching for his hat. "Frankly, I don't get it." He lifted his hat toward his head. Suddenly, his arm stopped. Something tumbled from his hat, hit him on the head, clattered down onto the table. All eyes stared at it.

The cameo lay on the cards. The diamond chips and the gold mounting sparkled around the cool green of the jade.

Slickson paled, his jaw dropped as he stared at the cameo.

Shark said nothing, stood grinning.

Mrs. Buxton snatched the cameo from the table, dropped it into her bag. "So it was you all the time," she shot at Slickson. She turned then to Shark. "I'm terribly, terribly sorry. I've done you a gross injustice. I apologize."

Slickson's head jerked up. His black eyes blazed across the table at Shark. "Damn you," he bit out. "This is a frame. You stole that cameo from Mrs. Buxton's cabin. You pulled the old sleight-of-hand stunt, dropped it into my hat."

Captain Horn's head snapped up. The red of his face grew deeper. He glared at Shark through narrowed eyes. "By the saints of the river—if I thought. . . ."

Shark's hand was close to his derringer. He said coldly: "Be careful what you think, Captain." When no one spoke, Shark turned, went out, stuffing bills into his wallet.



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CHAPTER

1

No-Trouble Gent

The caller made the announcement that cleared the floor and sent the ladies to the room's far end while the men self-consciously lined up for their turns at the box-supper table. Joe Tyson and Ben Sayers laid fiddle and guitar on the piano. And, with Eddie Masaco, left the platform where the teacher's desk usually stood. And there was a good deal of talk and laughing as someone laid hands on Dick Price and shoved him to the head of the line. He picked a box bound with red ribbon, read the name on it and walked straight across to Martha Telford while they laughed and hooted, for he'd brought Martha and there had been no guesswork in his choice.

Outwardly, it had been much the same as other after-Easter dances, with the old folks the first to arrive and dancing the hardest and the families up Dog Creek way sending



Bates said: "You always
did think you were good
at this. . . ."



HARVEST

word they couldn't make it because of a late snow and mired roads.

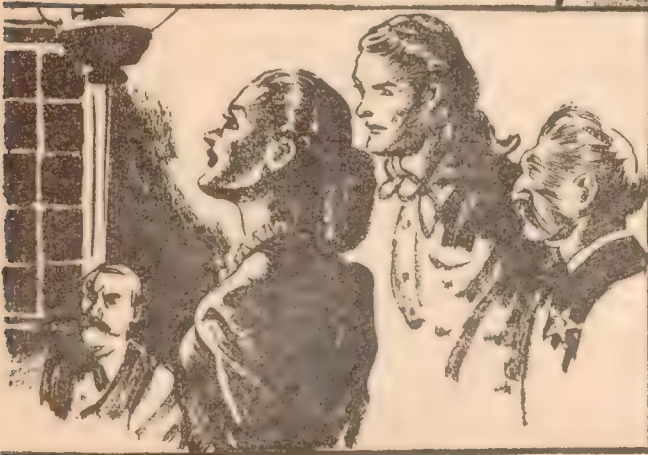
But a few noticed a difference this year. There hadn't been much real fun so far. Too many of the couples had too much to think about and, feeling the undercurrent of tension, Dave Trask wished it was over.

This Dave Trask was a tall and rough-hewn young man with the overwide shoulders and the flat-hipped leanness bred of long acquaintance with the saddle. The face was a strong one, sun and wind-tanned to the color of new leather. Blond hair was at odds with deep-brown eyes that mirrored a definite reserve and a maturity beyond his twenty-six years. But there was warmth and an easily-roused humor to the eyes that frequently belied that studied reserve, so that more than one man had wondered at it and failed to understand it.

He looked, and was, uncomfortable in a black suit, his shoulders cramped for room. The tallest figure in this gathering, he somehow managed to make himself inconspicuous.

Just now his glance searched the other

All of Dog Creek wanted to be friends with likable Dave Trask—but Trask's friendship wasn't free to give to the warring cattlemen . . . or the hard-bitten lawman.



end of the room and swung away deliberately when he saw that Nora Drew was watching him. She smiled and even lifted a hand; but he gave her no chance, his expression impassive as he turned and made the pretence of listening to the talk behind him.

She was easily the prettiest girl here, he was thinking, her tallness and slenderness accentuated tonight by chestnut hair piled high on her head. That coppery hair was bound by a light-blue ribbon that matched the color, but not the brightness, of her eyes and her starched dimity dress was gathered at the waist subtly to hint at the contours of a flawless figure.

Nora had so far danced with Red Mason, Ned Stonebreak and Sheriff Dan Hulett. Just before this intermission she had spotted Dave across the room and started over to him but he had drifted out the door and walked down to the willow thicket by the well for a smoke. From the shadows there he had seen her come to the door and look out for him and then reluctantly turn back again.

Behind him as he moved to the table for his turn, Sheriff Hulett said affably, "Pick a good one, Trask. I'm after some of Virginia Hughes' fried chicken."

"So am I," Dave answered.

He reached down to a plain box, turned up the corner of the card held by the narrow white ribbon and immediately recognized Nora's handwriting and unobtrusively picked up the next one. This was Virginia Hughes' and he put it under his arm and turned, grinning broadly, to Dan Hulett.

Then, beyond, he saw the three wide-hatted men coming through the door and his face settled in gravity. Instead of the bantering remark he had been about to make, he said quietly, "We have visitors, Sheriff."

All those sounds of people enjoying themselves, the excited talk and the laughter, died abruptly. Mrs. Chalmers standing by the coffee table reached up and brushed a strand of grey hair from her forehead, her frantic glance going to the line until she found her husband and was thankful he was this close, not near the door.

Dave Trask and all the rest forgot the two lesser men by the door and watched only Fred Bates as he slowly pushed his coat open and hooked thumbs in the heavy twin shell-belts crossed low at his waist.

His wide frame looked solid as rock as

he stood there, letting the impact of his presence carry home. He was good-looking in a rugged superficial way, until he smiled as he did now and gave a hint of the calculating coldness that was so much a part of him.

"Sorry to butt in, folks," he said over the silence, sealing that irony with a broadening of the smile. "But you're all together and this is easier than sendin' the word to you separately."

He cleared his throat and the cocksure glance of his grey eyes was picking out certain individuals in the lineup of men before him. When his look ran over Dave Trask, Dave shifted his high frame from one foot to the other and he reached over to tuck the box more securely under his arm.

"Beginnin' day after tomorrow," Bates went on, "we start stringing wire across the Squaw Creek pass." He deliberately drew a gold watch from the vest under his canvas windbreaker, snapped open its cover and looked at it. "You've got just thirty-six hours to comb those hills and get your cattle down below the line. After that, Pierce's orders are for me to shoot any animals not wearin' the Yoke."

DAVE'S eye went back along the file of men beyond the table, seeing the varying degrees of anger and hatred and fear mirrored on those faces. Only one, young Ed Thorson, showed any enjoyment of this scene and Dave noted this and failed to understand it.

Now Bates' glance came around to the sheriff and he queried, "That all right with you, Sheriff?"

"You know it has to be, Bates," was the lawman's sober rejoinder.

Yoke's foreman asked, "Anyone else have anything to say?"

In the following silence, one of his men—a sallow-faced youth with bright wicked blue eyes—reached over and scratched a match on the varnished door-frame, leaving a burnt line there. He lit his smoke and his glance challenged anyone to call him on what he had done.

Suddenly, out of that abject silence, Nora Drew said, "Yes, I do."

She hesitated a moment, either startled or frightened at what she had done. But then her head lifted and she stared at Bates with a glittering defiance. "We're moving off that grass because we have to, even

though there's enough and to spare for all of us. Pierce is getting his way. For now. But we aren't staying out. In just one week there'll be a man in here who can deal with this, who has the courage to stand up to you!"

Her accusing glance shifted to include the rank of men on the room's far side, the men she called her friends. Then she looked away and lowered her head and put her hands to her face. Those ladies nearest her heard her say softly, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that," and Grace Hulett stepped over and put an arm around her waist and said, "That's all right, honey. We understand."

Bates queried tonelessly, "Anyone else?"

The stillness held and became uncomfortable as the three Yoke men waited.

Then it was over. Bates and his riders left, the musical whisper of their spurs sounding in from the yard and shortly the soft earth giving out the pound of hooves as they took the trail up the valley.

The box lunches were forgotten now, put aside. There was little talk, what with the work to be done and the little time in which to do it, and the gathering was thickest in the corner where coats and blankets and overshoes lay piled on the front row of the desks stacked there.

Dave pulled on his sheepskin and, broad hat under arm, came over with Nora's maroon wool coat. He helped her on with it and said, "Be back in a minute."

He went over to the hogsback stove and from the bricks and pans arrayed on its broad top lifted off a sand-filled frying pan covered with a lid, the heat of the handle coming through his glove.

Sheriff Hulett stepped in close to him, saying, "Trask, she's wrong. Something's got to be done about that. Has she really sent for Bob Randall?"

Dave nodded soberly. "Had a letter from him yesterday. He pulls in next week."

Hulett cursed softly. "That's bad. Awful!"

"So?" There was something important here and Dave set the pan back on the stove, rubbing his hand. "Nora's counting on him," he added.

The sheriff snorted and shrugged in a helpless way. "Of course she is. Bob's a fine boy, maybe a man by now. But good heavens! Bates is a tough one. You saw him tonight."

A tightness that was almost fear was

gathering in Dave as he said slowly, "Nora tells me Randall can take care of himself. That he's big, handy with a gun."

"She would." Hulett smiled, almost sadly. "Women in love are that way, Trask. They say she's marryin' Bob. But he's just an ordinary person. Not as big as you. And all he's ever had to do with a gun is huntin' coyotes or jack-rabbits."

"That makes it different."

"Mark my words, Trask. If Bob Randall tries to do anything about this, he'll—" Hulett left it up in the air, shrugging again.

"Can't you do anything about the fence, Sheriff?"

The thin old man shook his greying head. "Not one damned thing. It's legal in every way."

Dave said, "Well, we'll see. Good night."

He picked up the pan again and went out with it to the buggy where he wrapped it in a feed sack. He lit the lantern hanging from one of the topstays and made one more trip inside, getting the blankets and then going over to Nora. He stood inconspicuously by while she said her good-nights and he a few of his own.

OUT at the buggy, he tucked the blankets around her and climbed in and they drove across the yard and through the gate, which put them on the rutted road. It was cold and with no urging the pair of blacks reached out into a brisk trot.

Nora said, "Dave, it's silly to sit there freezing like you did on the way in. Here, let me." She moved the blankets and put half of them over his legs and reached across to push them under him and when she finally leaned back she was close.

She put an arm through his, and her light perfume, along with her nearness, roused in him that feeling he was always fighting to keep down. He was, he realized, more fully aware of her than of any woman he had ever known, and at times like this his desire was like a runaway colt.

It was hard to remember now the things that put her beyond his reach, that would always stand between him and this wholly desirable girl. Besides, there was Bob Randall, a good man whom she loved.

He told himself, *Get a hold on yourself, Trask. You've kept the bit in your teeth this far. Now's no time to let go.*

Nora said with a touch of petulance, "We didn't get to dance, Dave."

"It ended before it should've."

"I was looking for you before the music stopped."

He thought a moment, then lied, "The mare acted like she had a sore foot on the way in. I was out having a look at her shoes."

"She's all right now."

"I know."

Close ahead, the light of a buggy wavered against the blackness and shortly drew off to the right and stopped where the road branched. They pulled up alongside and it was Johnson who called, "Nora, I forgot to ask about your dad."

"He's doing just fine, Nels," Nora answered. "The doctor says he'll be walking in another month."

"Did he sell that horse?"

"No. I did. And don't you tell Dad. He wanted him shot." Her musical laugh sounded across the interval and was answered by Johnson's, deeper-toned.

"Need anything?" the rancher asked.

"No. Dave and Pete look after me very well, thanks."

They waved a goodnight and drove on, the road climbing now with the deeper black of timber a high block of shadow to their right. As often happened when they were together, minutes passed without either saying anything.

Usually, at times like this, her nearness and that alone was such a completely satisfying thing to Dave that talk wasn't necessary. But tonight he was restless, somehow resentful at realizing that Nora seemed perfectly happy and contented at being with him.

He reached over presently and with one boot drew the burlap-wrapped pan closer in to her feet, thinking he'd have to stop spending so much time around the place, so close to this lonely girl. Maybe he'd get out and mend fence or go up to the line-shack on some pretext and live there awhile. But with old Pete Allison the only other well man on the ranch, it sure would be difficult.

Tom Drew with his broken hip needed looking after and unless they brought some woman out from town to do the housework and answer his needs Nora would have to keep on as she'd been doing. There was enough work for two right on the place.

"Dave, I'm afraid," Nora said abruptly.

"Of what?"

"Of Fred Bates," she answered.

He took the whip from the socket and flicked the gelding across the rump and moved him up even with the mare. Off to the left the lantern's light threw moving shadows among the boulders closely flanking the trail. He thought of several point-less things to say, voiced none of them.

"And of what will happen when Bob gets back. I've been a fool, Dave!"

He drawled, "That depends on what you expect of Randall. Bates is dangerous."

"I know. I realized it tonight for the first time. You shouldn't have let me write, Dave."

He chuckled. "I'm just a hired hand. I don't tell the boss's daughter what to do."

"That's where you're wrong," she said soberly. She turned and he knew she was studying him. "In these two years, I've come to depend on you. You're almost like a brother." Then, abruptly, "You never carry a gun, do you?"

"No."

"Why is it, Dave?"

He was careful of his answer. "Liable to get a man into trouble."

His glance came around to her with unconscious belligerence and in the pale reflection of the lights he could see the perfect oval of her face gather in frowning concentration.

"That's one thing I've noticed," she said.

"You go out of your way to—to just that, keep out of trouble. Like last summer when we saw Fred Bates for the first time. Saw him beating that dog with the rope-end. Dad called him every vile name he could think of. You just stood there, out of it."

DAVE had nothing to say to that. He drove on, sobered by the thought of the showdown to come, by knowing that wherever a light showed along the valley tonight it meant that men and women were speaking bitterly and resentfully of Fred Bates and Pierce and Yoke's fence.

This ultimatum touched him closely, deeply, for now that Bob Randall was on his way in, it threatened Nora's happiness directly. And her happiness meant a great deal to him.

"How long's Randall been gone?" he queried.

"Too long. For three years."

"Going to marry him when he gets back?"

She was a long time answering that. "I don't know, Dave. He'd like to marry me. And I suppose I love him. But I want to be sure. Another thing. He doesn't have much."

"You don't need anything, if you feel right about him."

"I know," she agreed musingly.

Presently he felt her head come to rest on his shoulder and realized she was asleep. He gently wakened her some forty minutes later as the buggy drew up to the meadow gate below Stirrup. Pete's lantern winked at them from the barn as he drove to the house, let Nora out and took the team below to unhitch.

Pete met him at the wagon-shed and the oldster's first words were, "See him?"

"Who?"

"Young Randall. Up there at the house."

"No." Instant shock and a sense of uneasiness crowded in on Dave.

Pete spat deliberately into the snow, tongued his tobacco into the other cheek. "Yep. Rode in two hour ago. Come in on tonight's train. Hid his rig behind the house so he could surprise her. Changed, he has."

"Changed?"

"Looks like a bank clerk now. Used to be, he was just like me and you. But now I'd say he'd hate havin' his hands dirtied on somethin' like this here harness. 'Course, you can't tell by a man's looks."

"No." Dave was silent a few moments, working around the team. Then he told Pete of what had happened at the dance.

Pete began cursing, deliberately, feelingly. Dave only half listened as he finished his work and pushed the buggy into the shed. They started up the path to the house. When Dave angled off toward the bunkhouse, Pete queried, "Coffee?"

"Not tonight." Dave answered.

In the bunkhouse he sat on his bed and rolled a smoke and thought back over the things Nora had said on the way out here, absent-mindedly answering a question or two of Pete's, deciding finally that the oldster's judgment of Bob Randall mattered as little as a lot of his opinions.

He got up finally and stepped over to the stove and opened it and threw in two rounds of cedar, noticing only then that Pete had settled down to a game of solitaire.

"Night-owlin' again?" he asked, thinking that it was late. Pete's only answer was a grunt of agreement.

Tonight Dave was having to recognize something he had lately been pushing to the background of his awareness, unwilling to admit. He loved Nora. His feeling for her was deep and real and had become all-important, even though he had long ago decided it was a futile thing.

He had stayed on here thinking that there was no harm in satisfying his hunger with her nearness, with the sight and sound of her, so long as she didn't know how he felt.

But there had been harm in it. He had suddenly realized during and after the dance, certainly and with a strange lift of pride, that it would take but little to stir in her a feeling like his own. He had sensed her interest more keenly than ever before tonight and had at once become wary of it.

And now he knew that soon he would have to be leaving, as soon as Tom Drew was up and around again. Nora's happiness was all that mattered. That one thing, her happiness, had been on his mind for a long time. He had long ago realized that it was a thing that he could never bring her directly.

A QUESTION kept crowding him and he thought with an odd irrelevance, *I've had her word and Hulett's that he's a good man. What Pete thinks doesn't matter.*

An abrupt decision made him reach down the lantern and light it. He went out once more, ignoring a query from Pete. At the corral he saddled his bay and led him back to the bunkhouse.

Changing from his black suit to waist-overalls and a heavy wool shirt, he told Pete, "Most of our stuff ought to be up that canyon along the north fork of Squaw. Don't waste too much time above. I'll probably see you up there." He pulled on the sheepskin and went to the door.

"And where you off to?" Pete turned from the cards to look at him.

"Just prowlin' around. Nothing special."

"Where you aim to prow?"

"That depends on a couple of things."

The door had closed and the sound of the bay's footfalls had died out and still Pete sat half turned in his chair, staring at the door. Something was happening tonight that he didn't begin to understand. First Randall's sudden appearance and now Dave acting in this strange way.

He finally turned back to the cards,

played out the hand, dealt himself another. But this time the game didn't hold his interest and he got up and filled his cob pipe. He heard Bob Randall's buckboard rattle out across the yard, stop for the gate, go on. He had lit his pipe and was pressing the glowing coal down into the bowl with a calloused thumb when he heard a quick step.

A light tapping sounded on the door and then Nora called, "Dave, are you still up?"

He went to the door and opened it, telling her, "Dave's gone for a ride."

She frowned, stepping in, asking with concern, "Where's he riding, Pete?"

He shrugged and, after a slight hesitation in which he decided he shouldn't worry her, said, "Probably up Squaw."

She was at once relieved. She even smiled as she asked, "Then you'll see him in the morning?"

"I reckon."

"Would you tell him something for me, Pete?" She caught his nod and hurried on, "Just tell him that Bob's going back to Denver in the morning. Without seeing Bates. And without me."

Pete's grizzled brows arched in surprise. Her smile broadened at seeing his expression and she said, low-voiced, "And you might tell him that I'm happy about it. Is that wrong, Pete?" she queried. Before he could answer, she went on in a rush of words, "I tried so hard to bring it back. I mean the old feeling I had for Bob. But he's changed, Pete. I—I could never feel the way I once did about him. And he didn't seem to mind too much."

The oldster was grinning now, inordinately pleased at his judgment of Randall. He said, "Your pa's always been a good judge of horse-flesh, Norrie. Horses and men, you can't fool Tom Drew. Maybe you're takin' after him."

Nora said, "Thanks, Pete. Now I feel better." And she turned and went out the door.

Makes a little more sense now, Pete was thinking as he turned the lamp down and crawled in between the blankets. He was thinking of Dave and how he was the one man he'd be glad to see Nora marry.

no light showing as Dave rode in on the lay-out, intentionally keeping to the trail. He was swinging out of the saddle before the pasture gate when a voice spoke to him from a tangle of scrub-oak nearby:

"Hold on, fella! Who're you?"

He turned to face the voice. "Trask, from Stirrup. Is Bates around?"

Now he could make out a man's shape against the backdrop of the mountain to the west, beyond the thicket. Whoever he was, he held a Winchester cradled across one arm.

"Stay set," he was told finally.

The other disappeared beyond the thicket and for a few seconds Dave could catch the slur of his boots against the gravel as he went away along the fence.

He pulled off his gloves and built a smoke and lit it, blowing on his hands which were stiff with the cold. He looked upward along the rise and could see the pale rectangle of Pierce's big stone house showing in the starlight against the background of the timber. A clutter of corrals and sheds lay downward to the right and it was there, presently, that a light showed.

He moved over and lifted first one boot, then the other, tapping them against the lower pole of the gate to bring back the circulation in his feet. He could see his breath, a pale vapor against the blackness, and he was thinking that not many of the valley cattle could have worked high up into the hills with the weather this cold. He heard someone coming at a casual pace toward him.

Shortly he saw a shape against the pale ribbon of the lane and then Fred Bates was calling, "Trask?"

"Here," Dave answered and the Yoke foreman came up and swung the gate back and stepped through.

Dave nodded to the oak thicket. "Let's move off a ways."

"This'll do," Bates said. "Jim's up there warmin' himself."

Once again Dave took out tobacco and paper. He helped himself and passed the makings over to the other. He had rolled and lit his smoke and was holding the match for Bates before he drawled, "That was a strong dose you poured out tonight, Fred."

In the light of the match he saw the other's wide mouth shape a downward curve, a half smile. "About time, eh?"

"Is it?" Dave asked idly.

"Sure. Pierce is puttin' up a lot of cash for this. In a year, I'll have a damned good stake."

"This young Randall is all primed," Dave said. "Pierce'll drop you like a hot iron if you murder him."



"Who said anything about murder?" Bates asked pointedly. "Can I help it if this joker crowds me? It'll be self-defense."

"He's a good kid."

"Then keep him out o' my way," Bates shrugged.

Dave sighed inaudibly. "Suppose Pierce knew who you were?"

"Now that's an idea," the Yoke man drawled mockingly. "Why don't you tell him?"

"Maybe I will."

"You?" Bates laughed. "Hell, you're so scared you won't even let on like you know

me. Hunh-uh! You won't tell Pierce. Or anyone else."

"You're damned right I'm scared," Dave said, on the edge of real anger now. "You tricked me into the one dishonest thing I ever did. I'm not giving you another chance."

Bates drawled, "Go ahead. Keep your nose clean. But don't get in my way."

Dave saw that it was no use. He stepped over to the bay, climbing stiffly into the leather that was so cold it sent a shock up along his spine. He reined over close to Bates.

"You won't change your mind, then?" he queried.

"Not a chance, not a chance," was the other's reply.

Dave went away, not looking back.

He was riding the trail several miles below Yoke, where it cut through a series of brush-choked ravines, when the snow started spitting at him out of the darkness. The night had been hushed and only once had he heard a sound, the far-off yapping of a hunting coyote. But now the air stirred fitfully in gusts that cut sharply at his cheeks and he buried his face in the sheepskin collar.

A GOOD hour and a half after leaving Yoke, as he rode on through a blinding snow-storm whistling across the flats, he came upon the tracks of the railroad right of way and turned west along them. Once the bay walked blindly into a telegraph pole, so Dave crossed the tracks and rode the far side.

The maze of corrals and the water tank and small frame house that was Gap way-station, fifteen miles west of town, stood out of the grey obscurity suddenly and in a moment when the wind had fallen. There was no light in George Thorson's house at this late hour.

Dave circled the loading-pens and over by the house a dog's strident barking cut loose. The dog ran at him and he called to it and kept on, the bay sidestepping and tossing his head, careful of the nuisance at his hind feet.

Lamplight all at once shone from a rear window of the house and as he came closer the back door opened and George Thorson stood there barefooted and wearing pants pulled on over a flannel nightgown. The

agent bawled at the dog and the barking stopped.

Dave called, "Get on in before you freeze. Sorry to bother you this late, Thorson. But I've got a wire to send."

"Oh, it's you, Trask." Thorson yawned and ran a hand through his coarse thatch of grey hair. "Go on around front and I'll let you in. Couldn't it wait?"

Dave pretended not to hear the agent's question and rode around the corner of the building. He ground-halted the bay in the lee of the house and walked around and was waiting at the front door when Thorson opened it, lamp in hand.

"These damn' winters never seem to finish," the agent said as he closed the door and nodded to the stove. Dave crossed to the stove on the far side of the cheerless small room, the walls of which were undecorated except for a clock that hadn't run for years and an ornate calendar picturing a herd of buffalo crossing a railroad track in front of a stalled train. Two caboose-chairs, a deal table and in the front corner two signal lanterns, a flag and several mail-hooks completed the room's furnishings.

"That's bad about Pierce's fence, ain't it?" Thorson said worriedly. The extent of his concern was obvious when he went on almost immediately, "Got your wire written out?" He put the lamp on the table, sat down and switched on his key.

"No, I'll need some paper." Dave came over from the stove.

Thorson furnished a pad of telegraph blanks and a pencil and Dave wrote out the message, finally pushing it across, drawling, "Guess that'll do."

Thorson's face was slack with sleepiness as he looked at the message. Then abruptly all the looseness left it and his glance came up sharply and he breathed, "No!"

Dave nodded, said nothing. Presently, after a second reading, Thorson leaned back and studied Dave narrowly.

"You've signed for the sheriff," he said. "Why isn't he sendin' it himself, from town? How do I know he wants it sent?"

"You don't. You'll have to take my word for it."

Thorson frowned, hesitating. Dave added, "Ed was at the dance tonight, so you know what went on. Maybe Hulett wanted to keep this quiet, didn't want people in town to know about it and start talkin'."

Something he said must have prodded

Thorson's slow wits into agreement, for now a briefly interested and calculating look crossed the man's face and he muttered, "Whatever you say."

As he tapped out the message, Dave moved over and read it again, wanting to be sure it was right. What he had written, was,

GLOBE, ARIZONA.

IS FRED BATES STILL WANTED
BY YOUR OFFICE. REPLY AT ONCE.
DAN HULETT, SHERIFF

He gave Thorson a dollar when the message was finished, received some change, said, "No, thanks. I've got to be gettin' back," to the other's offer of a cup of coffee and stepped out into the cold again. The snow had slacked off but the wind still cut at him sharply.

A quarter-mile back along the trail he could now easily follow he came to a low rock outcropping. Beyond, the trail dipped steeply down across a wash, then up again. Here Dave reined aside and rode a good hundred yards, until a shadow that turned out to be a low-growing cedar showed in the faint light.

He tied the bay there and, hands thrust deep in pockets, walked back to the trail. He found an indentation along the back length of the granite outcrop and hunkered down there out of the wind.

As the minutes passed, he had to straighten to keep from dozing. He was hungry for a smoke and was on the point of reaching for his tobacco when he thought better of it. He took off his gloves and blew on his hands and once he breathed an oath as a wind-gust whipped snow over the ledge and sifted some of it down his collar.

Finally he heard the sound he had been waiting for, the faint but steady hoof-strike of a trotting horse coming from the direction of the station. He came erect and edged around so that he could peer into the far darkness beyond the ledge's corner.

Standing that way, he watched George Thorson's son, Ed, ride down the slant of the trail and disappear across the wash.

He did build a smoke then, taking satisfaction not only in the taste of the tobacco but in his hunch having turned out the way it had. Just what hold Fred Bates had on Ed Thorson he had no way of knowing. But the man's loyalty had seemed plain to him at the dance tonight and now he was sure of it.

BACK-TRAIL HARVEST

Young Ed Thorson was carrying the word to Yoke.

CHAPTER

3

Back Trail

The wind shifted at dawn and it was warmer and the snow turned to rain falling out of a lowering sky that mantled the foothills in a grey dripping mist. The tall lodge-pole pines shed their heavy burden of snow with a steady sibilant whispering that murmured over the footfalls of the bay as Dave came along the upper stretch of the town road.

He wore a borrowed slicker over the sheepskin and he was warm and dry except for his face, and enjoying this. His mind ran idly over the things he must be doing before many more weeks had passed.

The calving-coral and sheds in the upper meadow could stand some repair, at least two days' work would be necessary with a scoop filling in the break in the tank below the old windmill and the east forty of alfalfa needed reseeding. He guessed he wouldn't be seeing too much of Nora after all.

The weight of the .44 Colt's at his thigh was a reminder to put all his planning aside. This other came first. Last night, carefully judging what he knew of Fred Bates, he had ridden toward a few miles, deciding to keep away from the ranch and put up with Red Mason.

But he had found Mason's cabin empty; probably Red had ridden into the hills to be ready with many of the others at dawn to begin combing the timber for cattle to push below the Squaw Creek fence line.

Dave had made himself and the bay at home at Mason's small layout. He'd slept well and eaten a big breakfast this morning and this slicker and the .44 were Red's. On the bachelor's table lay a note he had left, stating simply, *Borrowed some things. Dave Trask.*

The ruts of the road deepened where it swung out from the hills across the thicker soil of the grassland and Dave put the bay to one side of the brimming wheel-tracks. The rain held a steady undertone of sound and the haze had lifted gradually as he went lower and now he could see the better part of a mile.

Coming down on the schoolhouse, he saw



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Mrs. Chalmers and Grace Hulett standing
on the porch, winding colored streamers
that had decorated the ceiling at the dance
last night, and he raised a hand as they
waved.

A buckboard lifted into sight over the
bare crest of a hill directly ahead and came
toward him. Shortly he recognized Dan
Hulett's team and slowed the bay to a walk,
finally stopping close beside the ruts.

"Mornin'," he said as Hulett reined in
alongside.

The sheriff ignored the greeting, thumb-
ing his hat back a little and looking across
with a serious dripping face.

"It took John a solid hour to find out who
sent that wire, and from where," he an-
nounced abruptly, referring to John Blake,
his brother-in-law who was station agent
in Singletree.

"So you got an answer?" Dave asked.

The law man looked at him narrowly.
"Yeah, I got an answer. You'd better come
on into town and see it."

"He's still wanted?"

Hulett nodded, adding a clipped, "He's
in town now," as he lifted the reins and, his
face still set stonily, turned the team around
and headed back the way he had come.
Neither spoke and the sheriff didn't once
look at Dave over the three remaining
miles.

Singletree looked sodden and dismal and
forlorn this morning. They rode down be-
tween the twin rows of elms fronting the
more substantial houses without seeing a
soul. Blue woodsmoke thickened the haze
and here and there a lamp glowed in a win-
dow, combatting the greyness. A dog
barked at them from a porch, but tiredly,
almost without interest.

Further down, Dave saw Ned Stonebreak
put in a brief appearance, hatless and coat-
less and running from the Feed and Grain
across the alley to the shelter of the broad
wooden awning fronting the bank and post-
office. The two rows of false-fronted build-
ings made a wide canyon of the single street
at this point.

Water gushed from rain spouts as roofs
and awnings shed their burden and the
street itself was a mire from one plank walk
to the other so that the bay and Hulett's
team kicked up a muddy spray, as though
fording a creek.

BACK-TRAIL HARVEST

Only the line of the railroad crossing rose above the mud, beyond which it continued between the board-and-tarpaper shacks beyond the lumber yard.

The walks were empty except for a woman looking in at the Mercantile's window and, beyond her, a rider idling in the lighted doorway of the Elite. Seeing that man, Dave said, "Be with you in a minute, Sheriff," and put the bay over there.

He turned in to the tie-rail before the assay office and the man on the walk straightened suddenly, wheeled and disappeared into the restaurant. As Dave swung from the saddle he looked back and saw the buckboard stopped there in the middle of the street, Dan Hulett watching him.

He was standing in mud instep-deep as he took off the slicker and spread it over the saddle, drops of rain insistently tapping the shoulders of the sheepskin. On second thought, he removed the sheepskin and put it under the slicker. His gloved right hand went down and wiped the walnut handle of the .44 as he stepped onto the walk and under the awning.

FACING the Elite, his glance not straying from it, he stood pulling the glove from his right hand. Behind him, he heard the woman's light step sound from the Mercantile's entrance and shortly the store's door slammed.

The pale wash of light coming from the Elite's doorway was briefly obscured by a shadow. And then Fred Bates came out onto the walk two full strides and turned to face him.

Over the span of a few seconds they eyed each other carefully. Yoke's foreman was without his coat, too, and made a blocky shape there on the walk.

It was Bates who finally drawled, "So you want to buy into this?"

"All the way," was Dave's deliberate answer.

Bates said, "You always did think you were good at this," and, speaking, bent slightly at the waist as his right hand slashed upward.

Dave's like motion was fast. He palmed the .44 up and out and thumbed back the hammer in one smooth flow of motion. As he paused, making sure, he was staring at the red-winking bore and hearing the thun-



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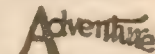


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derclap of Bates' hurried shot. Something
touched him along his left upper arm. Then
his own weapon jarred hard against his
wrist.

He saw Bates' heavy bulk pounded back,
double at the waist. The man's right knee
buckled and he wheeled and lost balance.
His hand opened and the heavy .45 banged
the plank walk before his body thudded
down onto it. Bates was dead as he fell.

Someone ran up behind Dave and across
the street a man shouted, "Where's Doc
Ingalls?"

Alongside Dave, Dan Hulett said, "You
shouldn't have given him the first chance,
Trask," and the law man went on past him
to where Bates lay as three Yoke riders
came out of the restaurant.

People were coming out of buildings and
along the walks, gathering here. Dave felt
of his left arm and brought his hand away
and looked down at the thin streak of crim-
son across his palm. And now the full shock
of realizing what a close thing this had been
left him momentarily faint and nauseated.
He stepped out into the mud again and
pulled on the sheepskin.

From the crowd, he heard Dan Hulett
say sharply to Yoke's riders, "He's yours.
Get him in off the walk. Then get out and
tell Pierce he can forget to string that
fence."

Shortly, the crowd parted and the sheriff
came out across the walk to its edge by the
tie-rail.

Dave said, "Let's go," and after a mo-
ment's hesitation Hulett came out to him
and they waded across the street and
climbed the outside stair to the sheriff's
office above the Cattleman's Association.

Hulett sat in the chair at his roll-top desk,
opened a drawer and took from it a tele-
gram, handing it to Dave without comment.

Dave read:

SHERIFF HULETT,
SINGLETREE, NEW MEXICO.

FRED BATES WANTED FOR BANK
ROBBERY BY THIS OFFICE. MAN
KNOWN AS DAVE TRASK, HIS AC-
COMPLICE, ALSO WANTED. BOTH
DANGEROUS. ADVISE IF INFORMA-
TION EITHER MAN AVAILABLE.

CLYDE WORTS, SHERIFF

Dave laid the telegram on the desk.
"Well, now you can advise him."

"I'm going to. Right now," Hulett said.

BACK-TRAIL HARVEST

He turned the yellow sheet over and picked up a pencil. Then he looked up and regarded Dave searchingly. "Did you know that Bob Randall came in last night?"

Dave nodded.

"And that he left first thing this morning?"

"No!"

Hulett said suddenly, "Damned if I'd risk my neck for another man!"

"No one asked you to."

"No, nobody did," the sheriff admitted. And now his glance came down and he began to write. When he had finished, he handed Dave the telegram.

SHERIFF WORTS,
GLOBE, ARIZONA.

FRED BATES KILLED IN GUN-
FIGHT HERE TODAY. NO INFORMA-
TION TRASK.

DAN HULETT, SHERIFF

Dave handed back the sheet, drawing, "Thanks, Sheriff. But you can cross out that last."

"Why should I? It's what I want to say."

Dave shook his head. "No. Instead, tell him I'm on my way back there."

Hulett's brows arched. "Going back?"

"Maybe they'll believe me now, with Bates out of the way," Dave told him. "Anyway, it's worth a try."

Hulett drew in a deep sigh, looking up at Dave. "And if they do believe you? Will I see you again?"

Slowly, Dave's face relaxed into a smile. "If you're around here you will, Sheriff. Because I've got something to come back for."

THE END

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Helps
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Here's a product that *really* does what it claims. It's a Doctor's wonderfully soothing yet powerfully medicated liquid called Zemo. First applications relieve itching and burning between cracked, peeling toes and aid healing. Zemo actually kills on contact the vicious germs* that cause and spread this trouble. That's why Zemo has such an amazing record of *continuous* success. First trial convinces. All drugstores.

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The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up

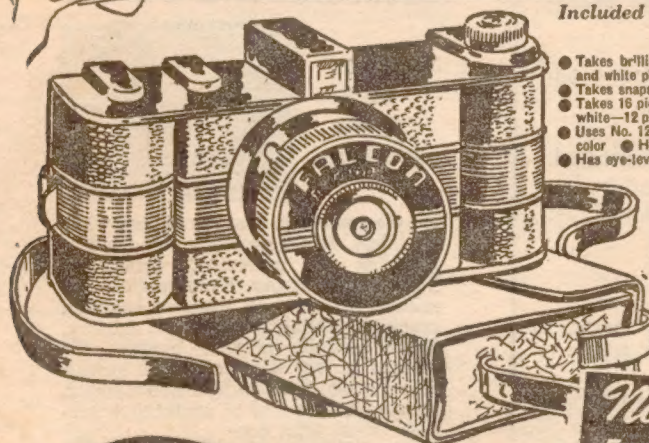
nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.



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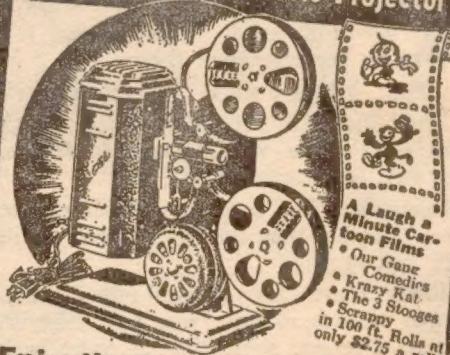
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The Outlaw

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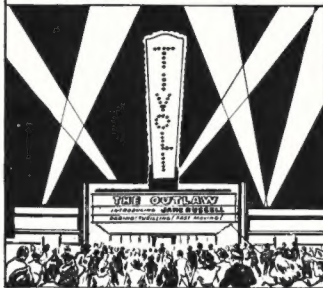


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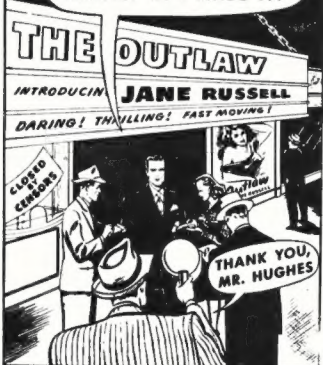


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